

The background of the title page is a rich, classical-style landscape painting. It depicts a deep river valley with a winding river in the foreground. On the right bank, a small village with a church is nestled. In the distance, a majestic castle with multiple towers and battlements sits atop a high, rocky cliff. The sky is filled with dramatic, billowing clouds, and the overall color palette is dominated by earthy browns, greens, and the warm tones of the sky.

A SONG OF THE NAMELESS TRAVELLER

TOMEK PIORKOWSKI

A Song of The Nameless Traveller

(The abridged free version of Ballad of The Nameless Traveller)

By Tomek Piorkowski
A Fantasy Epic in Rhyme

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Cover image: Painting by Thomas Cole, 'The Fountain of Vacluse',
1841

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A Nameless Hero...

His sworn enemy, Dundee....

A mad king, Mordecai....

And a Demon-god that would destroy the world....

These characters clash in an epic novel-length rhyming fantasy poem.

This is

The Ballad of the Nameless Traveller!

A note from the author:

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The Ballad's Prologue

This is the story of the nameless traveller,
a man who never shuns any sort of danger.
This is the ballad of the nameless traveller,
a man who is a man like no other.
This traveller - who remains so unfortunately nameless –
I greatly admire, and I could hardly let him remain fameless.

His face is handsome, his height is tall,
his bearing manly, and that's not all –
for his strength matches a hundred men –
no one can beat him (at least in my ken).
Though goodly and truthful,
he's also dashing and youthful,
and so the ladies all love him, for he is soft and gentle,
but the men all respect him for his iron mettle.
His hat is broad of brim,
his cape is dark and grim;
he clothes himself all in black,
with sword by his side, ready for attack.

And when he does not walk with booted stride,
he has a fine black mare on which to ride :
a mighty hero steed,

to aid in goodly deed.

She comes and goes at the command of a whistle-tune.
Her black coat glistens in the light of a midnight moon.
Tirelessly, she carries the traveller on his ways,
through danger and peril, with the bravest of neighs.

To keep himself awake as he travels far and long,
he hums himself a tune, or whistles, or sings a song.
This then, is the traveller, so good and so bold.
This is the traveller of whom great tales are told.
There are many stories telling of how and why,
He foiled the schemes of the Witch-king Mordecai;
And of the deeds of his mortal enemy,
that reluctant anti-hero, Count Dundee.
Also tales how he saved the world from its doom
At the hands of the fearsome demon-god Uzoom...
...But I rush ahead of myself, and speak of the end,
When I have not even yet begun my tales, my friend.
Well, tales of him linger, far and near;
Here's one of those tales reached my ear :

The Ballad of the Traveller in the Land of the Angles

Far away, in a place of inclement clime,
a lady was fearful, once upon a time.
She was the most beautiful girl of her village;
so said all the workers, working their tillage.
Her eyes were deep and full of flair,
she walked about with a graceful air,
her hair tumbled down in luxurious curls;
she was the envy of all the village girls!
She was the most charming girl that could be,
even her name was pretty : Annabel Lee.

But one day she walked with a nervous pace,
with the saddened look of a downcast face.
The villagers all came on the double,
to find out from her what was the trouble.
They asked her the meaning of all of her dread,
so she came to explain, and this is what she said :

"Last night as I lay, oh so gently napping,
I awoke to the sound of a peculiar rapping.
I stood up, surprised at the sound of this tapping,
so I went investigate to see what was happening.
I walked about the expanse of my hut
only to see my windows all shut.
My door was locked, my home was secure, all was unbroken;
there was no sign of forced entry, not even a token.
Then there suddenly came a coughing sound;
in panic and fear, I spun right around,
to see that behind me there was no other than
the shadowy figure of a frightening man.

I cried out, 'How? How did you come right?
To come into my house in the dark of the night?'
And he opened his two eyes - his two eyes glowed bright,
they shone in the dark with supernatural light.
His skin was as pale as the colour of milk,
I think that his clothes were made of red silk.
His clothes and his bearing were of a nobleman,
but I knew in horror that this was no human.

He then said to me, 'To answer your question
for your mind's intellectual digestion :
I came right down, down your chimney,
down your dirty narrow chimney.
I happen to be too big to have come down your chimney.
So you probably think that my story is too flimsy -
for sooty I should be, coming down the chute,

and squashed and crushed and distorted, to boot.
But I did not come down here in the form of a man,
I tell you that I came in a form none other than
that of a bat, a winged bat.
What do you think of that?'

I was scared after all that he said,
I feared that I was as good as dead.
'Air and earth,' I cried, 'Water and fire!
Down my stark chimney has come a vampire!
Oh my father, late father, how I wish that now
you were still alive and with me somehow.
Oh my brothers, my three brothers, where are you?
Still in the neighbouring village, not yet due.
And my dear mother died when I was born –
now I face *my* death, alone and forlorn.
I entertain no hopes, although I do crave
that I be buried right by my parent's grave.'

Then the pale vampire laughed, laughed in the dark,
his two long incisors glinting so stark.
'I am not here,' he said, 'to put you in the mud,
nor am I here to kill you and feast on your blood.
As much as you fear becoming an undead's dish,
I am here only to express my father's wish.
I am the son of Count L'Aster, my name is Dundee.
Long has my father's eye been on you, Annabel Lee.
Not far from here is the Castle Aster,
of which my father is noble master.
He is a powerful vampire lord,
undefeated by enemy sword.
He is admired; you will find
that he is a hero to our kind.
But some time ago the noble Count L'Aster
was struck by a familial disaster :
for his wife, my mother, was struck in the heart with a stake;

thus did a vile vampire hunter my mother from me take.

But that is a story

that is rather gory

and I would think that you would not like to hear it all,
for I have such good news, not fit for a dreadful pall.

The noble Count L'Aster,

the fearsome spell caster,

has spent so many lonely nights –

yes, too many lonely nights –

and so he has decided to no longer tarry :

he is pleased to announce that he will remarry,

and that he will keep close by his side

a beautiful lady he'll take for a bride.

Now, I would expect that your sweet bosom shall swell with pride –
for my father has chosen *you* to be his vampire bride!"

I was in shock, my hair was standing on end,

it felt like my mind would drive over a bend.

I asked of him, 'But how, how can it be,

that he comes specifically for me?

Aren't there pretty girls, both living and undead,

who would love to grace a good vampire's homestead?

I'm sure that I am quite unsuitable

(I'm really rather disreputable)

and to be the wife of a vampire lord –

that certainly doesn't strike the right chord!"

I waved my hands and shook my head

hoping that he would listen to what I said.

But though I pleaded, though I cried,

he brushed all of my complaints aside,

'What you say is patently untrue.

You evidently don't have a clue.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice, Annabel Lee!

For no longer human shall you have to be!

With a single bite

all will be right
and your blood and his blood will mingle –
you will barely feel even a tingle!
And so with the wedding kiss from my father,
his teeth shall sink and you'll become no other:
than a vampire like us!
Yes, a vampire like us!
You will learn to drink blood like you now drink wine.
In the nights you shall wake, your dresses will be fine.
You shall dance as a bat in the light of the moon,
you shall rest in your coffin in the light of the noon.
And the greatest thing of all
that you will celebrate at every ball
is that from the position of a lowly brat
you have been elevated and made aristocrat!"

This said Dundee, but though his voice
proclaimed that I should rejoice,
in my frightened heart despair
was the only thing it could bear.
Overwhelmed by fears
I broke into tears,
'But who will find me when I go?
And my brothers won't even know
where I've gone to and so I'll be sorry,
and they will be then consumed with worry.'

Then Dundee tried to smile warmly
(the effect was rather ghastly)
and then he told me,
'Ah no, but you see,
my father is not heartless,
and hardly even tactless.
You see, he spoke that you would react so,
and he told me that I should let you know,
that he shall wait a day.

Yes-yes, that's right, a day –
to pack all your things and to say your good-byes,
to arrange your affairs and to sigh all your sighs –
so that you are not in deep sorrow
when you go to his arms tomorrow.
You see how my father is wise,
you won't my dear father despise!
Now it is time for me to go,
I go to let my father know
that I have given his proposal –
to which you shall not give refusal –
for that would make him quite mad,
and that would turn out quite bad.
Time to fly, and so I hope you shall give tell :
A fond adieu, and a goodly farewell.'

But I wasn't in any state in order to tell
this fond adieu nor that goodly farewell;
for right there, standing on the mat,
horrid Dundee turned right into a bat.
Then he flapped his way into my fireplace –
then he went up my chimney out into space,
leaving me feeling hopeless, forsaken –
for I am as good as taken.
For who can fight a vampire's might?
It's bad enough to face a vampire in a fight,
but this is no ordinary being of the night –
who can face the terrible Count L'Aster,
the noted and fearsome mighty spell caster?
None stand a chance against him –
my hopes for escape are dim."

Thus ended pure Annabel Lee's sad tale,
her eyes full of tears, her face oh so pale.

The villagers heard her story, and how they were flustered!

The men shook their tools in anger and then they all blustered,
"We will not allow this crime, we all shall muster!
We shall polish our knives and make sure they've lustre!
We shall defend, protect you to the very last,
till the last knife is sheathed, till the last die is cast!"

"Fools!" a voice cried out –
everyone turned at the shout,
and who did they see?
'Twas the brothers Lee!

Annabel Lee cried, "My brothers, you have returned!
Thank goodness, how glad I am! I felt I'd been spurned!"

Samson, Solomon and Ezekial Lee
were proud and strong, as young men should be.
The brothers stepped forward, parting the crowd –
Samson the eldest spoke with clear voice, loud,
"Fools! Do you know at what you try to pretend
when you say that our dear sister you shall defend?
Count L'Aster has been known to destroy entire towns –
do you think he'll meet you with only meek little frowns?
You know nothing of his powers.
He'll come attack in midnight hours
and though you try to be so stout
he'll surely wipe all of you out.
Do not risk your children, mothers and wives.
Do not risk your village, your land, your lives.
Do not cause pain in those of your loved ones
who'll lose you as fathers, brothers and sons.
Let this then be our family affair,
or else too many shall too ill fare."
So spoke Samson, his voice bellowing and strong.
They all listened, and they knew he was not wrong.

Then someone cried, "Well, then don't stay another day!"

If we cannot fight, then you should all run away!"

Annabel Lee replied, "No, that won't succeed,
Count L'Aster will hunt us down in his greed,
then he will for all your contribution
wipe out this village in retribution."

Solomon Lee then spoke, "She's right,
there's no way to win this fight.
Rather you go back to your houses,
back to the arms of your spouses.
Tomorrow, bury us in our tombs,
for we will have met our dooms
making a desperate stand
against the vampire's hand.
If our sister does not want to be the Count's wife
she may end up having to take her own life,
unless the Gods up on their pinnacle
decide to send down for us, a miracle."

The people were upset, they gave out a cry –
"Is there really nothing for you to do but die?"

"Silence!" suddenly cried Ezekial Lee,
"I hear something! What could it be?"
They then heard with relative ease
the sound of humming upon the breeze,
a hum to a tune of hopeful mode
coming at them, from down the road.
Also there was the clip-clop sound
of a horses' hoof upon the ground.
All whispers of conversation died down –
they knew someone was entering their town!

A horseman was coming down the road, solemn and grim,
wearing a dark cape, and wearing a hat broad of brim.

The horse upon which he rode was as dark as the night.
The horse had two eyes flashing red, ready for a fight.
The black-clothed rider had strong shoulders broad,
though his bearing and aura were of a gentleman lord.
Hanging at the horseman's side was a mighty sword,
a blade of strength and courage wherever it warred.
Underneath his hat, the man's face was obscured,
though he seemed a man who had much endured.
The horse lazily trotted along
ignoring the village throng,
though her red eyes did flash
as though asking for a clash!

Then Samson Lee hotly cried out to him, "You! Stranger!
I know not who you are, but I'd be willing to wager :
that you serve the vampire master
of yonder castle of Aster!"

The three brothers Lee
stepped forth angrily
and stood in the way of the stranger,
ready to face some oncoming danger.
The three stood ready, but alone –
the rest watched, like statues of stone.
"If you want to take our dear Annabel Lee,"
cried Samson, "You'll have to get past us three!"

The traveller stopped, the brothers blocked his way,
but the man was unperturbed, and did nothing say.
His face was still hidden, he continued to hum,
and the brothers Lee were struck rather dumb.
Solomon then asked, "Hey! Are you friend or foe?
Answer us, or else it shall be to your woe!
We'll give you our best, and then some!"

But there was no answer, except for a hum,

and the horse snorted as if in derision
at Solomon's attempt at imposition.

Ezekial then shouted,
"Well, we have you outed!
You are not a friend,
so now meet your end!"

The three brothers then hollered a battle cry,
and charged forward ready to deal death or die,
each brother ready with a knife –
each of them ready for the strife.

The rider did not react, except to raise his arm,
and to quickly recite some sort of charm.
Then from his hand flew a magic bolt
that gave the brothers a mighty jolt!
They stopped to stare
as they became aware
that the bolt landed right in front of their feet –
they really were not sure how this magic to meet!
Thus bewildered, the three watched warily
as the horseman dismounted unconcernedly,
and then he faced the three, but without unsheathing his sword;
he did not look at them, he even yawned as if he were bored!

The three brothers looked at each other,
not sure what to think or what to wonder –
but then by signs of reassuring nods
they decided once more to chance the odds.

Though the three were armed
and hoped to make him harmed,
the traveller *still* did not unsheathe his sword
as he was charged by that threesome of a horde.
Instead – with various movements of his wrist,
a sidestep here, and there the occasional fist,

and a few kicks each as quick as a dart –
he met them with bare-handed martial art.

The three brothers found that their attacks
ended up with them landing on their backs!
And they found themselves disarmed too –
how that happened they had not a clue.

The three inspected themselves from tip to toe,
but no real injuries were inflicted by their foe,
though they certainly looked rough after the scuffle!
They noticed the traveller's clothes had barely a ruffle
and though he had the victor's part
(due to his fantastic martial art)
he did not press forward to finish the battle's course;
instead, having made a point, he remounted his horse.

Thus were the brothers Lee soundly defeated –
the brothers did not want this battle repeated!
Solomon thoughtfully rubbed his (aching) back, and then said,
"If you are one of L'Aster's men, then we should all be dead.
L'Aster's servants are known to love the slaughter –
L'Aster's servants are known to give no quarter.
We are fools to have made this mistake;
I only hope that you our apologies will take."

But the stranger made no reply,
though his horse did give a little sigh.
The three let the stranger carry on down the road.
The rider hummed that tune, that tune of hopeful mode.
The traveller and the horse went past
as if the village had seen of them the last.

But Annabel Lee
would not let that be
and she cried to the stranger, "Please, sir, won't you pause?
I apologise that we broke hospitality's laws.
But you see, we're in fear of a vampire lord,

the most vile Count L'Aster, much by us abhorred.
There are none of us here who can match his might;
what can we do, but resign ourselves to the blight?
But from what I've seen, you have much power –
could you be the one we need in this bleakest hour?
I cannot give much in payment, except to feed you well,
and what few valuables I own, for gold I will sell,
and that gold I shall give you
and a roof I can give too.
But at least, just pause enough to listen to my speech
so that I have a chance to tell you my story, I beseech!"

The traveller stopped at her call, and turned to hear;
to listen to her tale of woe, her tale of fear.
He lifted the brim of his hat, thus showing his face –
all the ladies felt their hearts flutter into outer space!
For the traveller had a beautiful, handsome face
with features like that of some noble ancient race,
and his eyes harboured no spiteful horridness –
for they clearly showed a soul full of kindness.
But they also shone like the eyes of a kingly lion;
they were eyes of courage, showing a will of iron.
Even the men were somewhat smitten –
admiration was on their faces written.

The black-clothed traveller looked straight into Annabel's eyes –
she became speechless, for his eyes were beautiful and wise.
The traveller dismounted his horse, and walked towards her.
The villagers made way for the noble goodly sir.
In front of Annabel Lee he bowed, and then he spoke,
"Who has dared in your heart to fear so stoke?
Fear not, I will not let him harm you,
and the day he tries, that day he'll rue.
Tell me your tale and your name,
then I'll help you, my fair dame.
My only condition, that you do not ask for *my* name,

nor should you inquire as to from where I came.
These are the only terms I ask for –
gold and such things I do not care for."

"What kind of weird deal is that? What is your strange game?"
cried the brothers Lee, "Why should we not know your name?"

But Annabel Lee said, "I don't care, why should it matter?
It doesn't bother me - why feed gossiping chatter?
Whatever your name,
from wherever you came,
it is not more frightening than that name 'L'Aster,'
nor so terrifying a place such as 'Castle Aster'.
I'm already in reach of a villain's clutch;
if you are a villain too, that won't mean much.
But when I look at you, I feel relief,
and I am filled with the sincere belief
that you are a man of virtue,
a man that is goodly and true.
Come inside, good sir, rest your feet,
and let me make you something to eat;
and brothers, take his horse to our stable,
let her rest and eat too, under its gable."

And thus our nameless hero became employed
in the service of Annabel, who was overjoyed –
it would certainly not be non sequitur¹
to say she had faith in her new protector.
But, at this junction of our heroic tale,
our story needs to another direction sail,
for we must now turn to the story of vampire Dundee –
what happened when he returned to the castle? Let us see :

After speaking with Annabel Lee, Dundee flew back home,

¹ Non sequitur - an irrelevant or illogical conclusion

his batwings flapped him through a window in the castle's dome.
Changing back to humanoid form he went to his father's throne,
whereupon the Count was waiting, sitting and brooding alone.
Count L'Aster was angry, Count L'Aster was mad,
his eyes were fierce with no mercy to be had –
all in all, his face looked very grim!
His son Dundee bowed before him.
"Father, I have returned," bowing Dundee did say,
"I told Annabel that she will be yours in a day."

"I regret that I listened to you," said his father,
"I wish that I had listened to someone another.
You managed a conversation clever and witty
to have so convinced me with your foolish pity –
to give that little woman an entire day
just so that she can have her little say!
You have been whining at me so oft²
that you are starting to make me soft.
Your playing the sage
has filled me with rage –
I should have taken that girl the moment I felt lust,
I should have got that girl the moment I felt I must.
Dundee, you soft pathetic little thing,
so corrupted by your mother's doting,
that you still only filthy pig's blood drink
because you think it evil for your teeth to sink
into a man's neck and so kill him in the process.
Vampire society considers you to be a regress,
some sort of primitive, and they are all agog
that you would drink the blood of a hog –
just because you were told by your mother
that 'we should all respect one another.'
When are you going to drink human blood?
Do you intend to always be a vampire dud?

² Oft - shortened form of 'often'

Your morality gets in the way of good vampiring;
I find myself a different type of son desiring.
This night has been torturing
just because of your hampering.
I wanted to send the wolves to get that wretched girl
but the night is almost over, dawn is about to unfurl.
I shall just have to wait for the end of today
before that woman is spirited away.
Because of you, idiot Dundee, I have to delay;
Deprived I am of my pleasure and my play –
I'm deprived of my human toy.
Arh! Get away from me boy!
You are a blight!
Get out of my sight!"

In his anger Count L'Aster threw a magic fireball
that his son had to sidestep, else on Dundee would it fall!
Dundee moved fast
and avoided the blast;
the fireball made a big ugly scorch mark on the floor
(whoever had to clean that scorch would have quite a chore!)
Dundee was afraid of his vampire father's rage;
Dundee decided, as actors say, to exit the stage.
He quickly ran off, before his father had the chance
to fire at him another deadly magic lance.

Now that he was done
chasing off his son,
Count L'Aster to himself thought,
'That boy will amount to naught,
just like his whore of a wretched mother,
who hated me so much she took a lover,
who gave her "gentleness"
while I was always amiss.
When I finally discovered her infidelity
I murdered her and her lover immediately;

then I told Dundee some or other lies.
But I'm beginning my own son to despise –
I should have murdered him like I murdered his mother.
Maybe I should take his life's flame and make it smother?
But no, killing my own son would be crude.
In any case, I'm not in the mood.'
Count L'Aster then gave a yawn,
for night was ending with the dawn.
"Time to go to sleep," he said,
and with that, he went to bed.

Dundee, in the meanwhile, after escaping his father,
was in his room staring at a picture of his mother.
But so tired was he, that he fell asleep; in his rest
he still clutched his dear mother's picture to his chest.
Then he had a dream that his mother was still alive,
and telling him of good and how honour can thrive.
"Son," she said, "Don't do an evil, just because it's small;
you may think it is of no consequence, but it shall appal.
For as a bucket can be filled with water drop by drop,
so seeds of bad conduct give rise to a bad karmic crop.
Besides, small beginnings often lead to great endings;
yes - small deeds can lead to disproportionate endings!
Some things cause more trouble than they are worth,
so avoid doing evil, and live in peace on this Earth.
Son, don't avoid a good deed, just because it is small,
and you think it not worth doing, for it won't count at all.
For as a bucket can be filled with water drop by drop,
so seeds of good conduct give rise to a good karmic crop.
Besides, small beginnings often lead to great endings;
Yes - small deeds can lead to disproportionate blessings!
Some good deeds cause greater effects than intended;
so my son, do good deeds, that this world may be mended."

"Mother!" In his sleep Dundee suddenly spoke,
and from his dreams he suddenly awoke.

"Oh dear," he said to himself, despondent,
as the dream of his mother, so resplendent,
reluctantly faded from his mind and heart.
"Mother, why did you have to from us part?
Why did that beast of a vampire hunter kill you?
It feels like he drove a stake through my heart too;
did that man have a heart of stone
to leave me and my father so alone?
And father, I think, misses you too,
although to show it he would never do;
he is after all, a man who never shows his feeling,
but under his mask, I'm sure he is a kind being."

The day passed, the sun rose and came and went;
and daylight ran back to from wherever it was sent.
The vampires preferred the night to the day,
so Dundee awoke then, to do what he may –
not knowing that during the day that had transpired,
a hero in Annabel Lee's service had been hired.
Dundee was first called to his father's throne,
to hear his father speak in the sternest of tone,
"My son, I apologise for my anger yesternight³;
after all, this evening you'll bring me my delight.
A little patience was all that was needed,
there was no need for discord to be seeded.
Now go, finish what yesternight was by us begun;
fetch me my prize, and prove to me you're a worthy son!"

After this speech, Dundee as a bat did fly,
flapping his way through the starlit sky
towards the home of Annabel Lee,
eventually flapping down her chimney.
He then transformed back to human shape,
and with a flourish of his bright scarlet cape,

³ Yesternight - the vampire equivalent of 'yesterday', a made-up word

he walked into the bedroom of Annabel Lee,
where in darkness her sleeping body he could see.
Dundee then said, "Come, my dear Annabel Lee!
It's time now - my father is expecting thee!"
Dundee then pulled off the sheet –
but there was no one to meet!

He dropped down his jaw
for in the dark all that he saw
was a bunch of fluffy pillows arranged to deceive,
so it looked like a body - so one would perceive!

"Did you find what you were looking for?"
said a voice, echoing from behind the door.
Dundee ran out, to find the voice's source;
back to the living room ran his course.

"Where are you?" cried Dundee, standing in the dark,
his ears for any suspicious sounds ready to hark⁴.
Suddenly, he heard the sound of a match striking,
and a small fire burst forth, an oil lamp lighting.
In the glow of the lamp, what did the vampire see?
Who was this unexpected one, now facing Dundee?

Upon the table, was a black hat, broad of brim;
sitting by it, was a man, clothed black and grim.
Dundee stepped forward a pace,
to look into the man's noble face;
Dundee noted, that the man had no fear in his eye.
What man was this, to be fearless with a vampire nigh⁵?
For vampires are strong : their supernatural strength,
is a topic that can be discussed at quite some length!
Yet this man seemed to care not,

⁴ Hark - to listen

⁵ Nigh - near

though he faced danger on the spot.

"I don't know who you are, but you are a fool,"
said Dundee, "for don't you know, as a general rule,
when a mere human attempts to with a vampire vie,
the human is always the one that is going to die!"

Dundee then with a supernatural leap
crossed the room with a flying sweep,
reaching out with his angry hands
to tear his foe into ugly strands.
But the nameless hero leapt up too,
he grabbed Dundee's hands with a grip strong and true.
To break that grip, Dundee was not able;
and him and the hero landed on the table.

Dundee tore himself free, then a fist fight ensued,
right there on the table they carried out their feud!
But though Dundee threw many punches,
the hero expertly countered the many lunges;
with the kind of martial skill that would astound!
They fought on the table, going round and round,
the hero's hat in the middle of it all.
They fought and fought, each trying hard not to fall
(The hat was almost trampled in the fight, no one cared!
But though the kicks were flying, the hat was spared!).
Dundee faced the strongest opponent he had ever met,
his arms were getting tired, his faced was drenched in sweat.
But the nameless hero looked so at ease –
he wasn't sweaty, and he smiled as if to tease!

Finally, from an unexpected blow,
off the table did Dundee flying go.
He landed by the fireplace,
but caught his breath a space,
and said, "What kind of a man are you?"

Is this a monster or angel in my view?
No ordinary man can vie with a vampire,
to be able to escape a fate ghastly and dire.
You are something else entirely,
and though it may seem cowardly
it is best that I hastily retreat
before *I* the dire fate should meet."

Dundee stepped back a pace
right into the fireplace;
his body quickly morphed into a reddish bat –
then he was up the chimney with a hasty scat!
The nameless hero followed in a few seconds flat
(stopping only to pick up his trusty black hat) –
he wanted to take the chase
so out the house he did race.

The nameless traveller looked into the starry sky,
searching for where perhaps the vampire bat did fly;
and there silhouetted by moonlight ray
he saw Dundee flapping quickly away.
He put his fingers to his mouth, gave a shrill whistle;
galloping came his horse, over briar and thistle.
Was there ever a more loyal trustworthy steed,
always ready for the master's whistle to heed?
The horse did not stop, but kept on galloping;
the traveller jumped up, magically leaping,
landing in the saddle
with hardly a hassle.
Then he grabbed on the rein
that was by the horses' mane
and he cried, "Hurrah! Hurrah!
Let's go forth with bravura!"

The brothers Lee, awakened by all the noise,
had by now come out armed in battle poise,

only to watch as the hero forth rode.
"Come! Let us our noble horses load!
cried the eldest, Solomon Lee,
"And we shall join the chase, we three!"

However, Dundee quickly put on the distance,
and the hero had to - with some reluctance –
slow his horse down
near the edge of town.
But though the hero and his steed had lost the race,
yet they knew where was Dundee's finishing place.
Said the hero to his steed, "I feel the hand of fate.
The night is not over, Castle Aster does await."
With an agreeing neigh
the horse pushed on the way.

Dundee meanwhile had to tell his father the tale,
of how because of a man his mission did fail.
His father cried out, "By all that is bloody with gore!
Get out of here, I don't want to see you anymore!
You foolish brat! You foolish boy! You foolish everything!
While you stand before me I wish your scrawny neck to wring!"
Roaring out his disgusted rage in a voice mad and hoarse,
Count L'Aster threw from his hands a mighty magic force –
it swept Dundee off his feet,
upwards he flew rather fleet,
until his head hit the ceiling
after which down he went reeling,
landing on his face hard upon the floor, his nose broken,
his mouth spitting out some gore.
Dundee quickly rose up, his hand staunching his bloodied face;
fearing his father's fury, he quickly ran from the place.

Count L'Aster was left alone,
sitting brooding on his throne.
Then with his voice so proud

he called booming and loud
for his fearsome werewolf servants two –
always his bidding ready to do.

Like vampires, werewolves can also change,
though of shapes they had a slightly wider range:
Of shapes to choose they have three.
What are these? Let us see -

They can make themselves look like men,
pretending to be human, wandering in a wen.⁶
Unfortunately, they are unable to change their ears –
so, if being found out is one of his fears,
the stealthy werewolf will his ears have to hide,
often wearing a great big hat, pushing his ears inside.
Otherwise when imitating the human form,
it's difficult to see they're otherwise from the norm.

Then they can take the wolf's animal form,
running in packs, howling like a storm.
Wild and proud and fierce and beautiful they are then;
and twice as dangerous to mere ordinary men.
Not once has sword had to meet a paw,
only to see sword defeated by the claw.

Lastly, they can take a form half-wolf, half-man –
the most dangerous form of the werewolf clan!
With the strength of a beast as well as being tall,
the sheer size will make a brave man's heart go pall.

"Gunder and Bunder!" cried Count L'Aster –
"Come now to me!" cried their master.
The two werewolf brothers quickly came

⁶ Wen - a large city

as soon as each heard the calling of his name.

Standing before Count L'Aster's seat

they were ready to do any feat.

Their master called, "Gunder and Bunder!

I've been denied my rightful plunder!

Some mere man has insulted me

and denied me my wife Annabel Lee.

"Now go forth and tear that man asunder!

Don't you come back unless with my plunder!"

So running they went forth, Gunder and Bunder,

all the while howling with howls like thunder –

through the castle gate and down the mountain road,

the full moon like a lantern shining as a goad,

down the craggy mountain path into the forest below,

amongst the silent midnight trees they hunted for their foe.

As the werewolves raced forward for the kill,

Bunder suddenly came to a standstill.

"There is something funny in the air," said Bunder.

"Brother, you are right, I sniff it too," said Gunder.

"Is it the faint scent of our quarry?" asked Bunder.

"It must be the scent of our quarry," replied Gunder,

"Follow it! Follow it! Follow the scent!"

And the wolves ran, panting as they went.

The moon shone bright, its light danced in the forest;

but down from the mountain came enveloping mist.

Though the nameless hero could not see far ahead,

still he galloped on, startling night creatures who fled.

But his steed suddenly slowed, then she stopped to stare –

her wary eyes peering into the foggy air.

From the mist two men came out,
both of them hairy and stout,
wearing gentlemanly suits with bow ties,
and top hats, and monocles in their eyes.

"Good evening!" the gentlemen said, "How do you do?"

"Good evening," our hero replied, "I do good and true."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance!" the two hairy men said,
each raising his hat, exposing big wolf ears on each head.

"Excuse us for asking, we are eager for knowing –
could you tell us, kind sir, where are you going?"

Replied our nameless hero, seated upon his mount,
"I ride forth to the castle Aster, home of the Count;
where I shall have to intrude upon his person –
I hope, however, that his fate shall not worsen,
for either he must listen, and do what is right,
or else we'll have to battle upon this misty night."

Gunder and Bunder then laughed with a howl;
Gunder and Bunder then declared with a growl,
"We have come howling from the gates of Aster.
We have come growling on orders of Count L'Aster.
We have been sent to tear a man asunder,
for this man denied the Count his plunder;
your bones tonight shall rest six feet under,
for you're that man, and we are Gunder and Bunder!"

Putting away their monocles, they began to transform –
in a few seconds they were huge beasts, howling up a storm.
Monstrous were their eyes, monstrous were their paws,
and between their gaping teeth monstrous were their maws.
Who could but think, that our hero was a lost cause –
for who could withstand those dreadful sharp claws?

But did our nameless traveller show any fear?
Was there any terror in those eyes that did peer?
Peering under the brim of his hat,
he grinned a light grin, right where he sat;
the horse beneath him glared her red eyes so,
flashing defiance, despising the foe.

The two werewolves leapt forward, hungry for the fight –
but our hero called out, and from his hand came a light;
as the magic spell took hold, lightning fell down,
electrifying the air, hitting Bunder's crown.
Bunder dropped back with a yelp
and like some helpless whelp
cried out in pain,
shaking his mane.

But the lightning missed Gunder, the wolf jumped ahead,
his hair bristling, ready to make our hero dead.
Then our hero from his saddle leapt
while his horse out of the way quickly stepped,
so that Gunder clawed at empty air;
then the wolf up to the sky did stare
for our hero was using magic to fly –
his silhouette by the tree tops Gunder did spy.

"You'll not escape me so easily!" Gunder did cry
and a heavy boulder from the ground he did pry,
and with his incredible werewolf power
threw the stone into our hero's tree top bower.

Our hero deftly turned to the side
so that the stone missed him wide.
The stone flew into an innocent tree trunk,
shattering the tree with a deafening *thunk*
so that bits of the trunk and leaves and branches,

rained down fast and mad with frightening lunges.

In the noise and debris of all this

Gunder the attack of our hero did miss;

for the nameless one flew down with sword out to strike.

Diving down at speed, Gunder's heart with sword he did spike.

Gunder roared with a terrible cry,

pain flashed furiously in his wolfish eye

as he fell down and on the ground then did lie.

He gave out something that might've been a sigh –

and that was how the werewolf Gunder did die,

after he with a great hero attempted to vie.

"My brother!" cried Bunder, in fury and rage,

for vengeance he leapt forth to battle engage,

but from behind he was mightily kicked by a hoof –

for our hero's steed kept not from battle aloof,

but had crept up behind to start an attack

by kicking Bunder in the small of his back.

Forward stumbled the werewolf Bunder,

every step a wobbling blunder.

Too late he saw the sword coming under,

the blade that his belly would tear asunder.

Down the wolf fell with a howl like thunder;

with another blow, it was the end of Bunder.

And so failed Gunder and Bunder our hero to kill.

They were too impetuous, although brave warriors still –

yet who can overcome our nameless hero's great skill?

For his heart is full of valour, and iron is his will.

The traveller cleaned his sword as a matter of course,

then lithely the traveller sprang back on his horse.

"Ride, boldly ride!"

the hero cried,

"Ride on to the castle of Aster!"

And they rode, faster and faster,
onward to a reckoning with evil Count L'Aster,
that fearsome and terrifying vampire master.

Meanwhile, somewhere else in the mist shrouded forest,
the brothers Lee in the darkness the road had missed
and now were wandering hopelessly lost,
the midnight air biting with a chilly frost.

"Have we not been here before?" asked the eldest, Solomon,
"Are we going in a circle in our wandering on?
Have I not seen that rock, that tree, that branch?
The moonlight is making everything go blanch,
so that there are no features to distinguish,
especially since our torch did extinguish."

But then Ezekial cried out suddenly, "What? Who?"
For from out the darkness came a ghostly *Huuuu*.
Cold terror came over the three;
in fear they trembled, these brothers Lee.
Then they saw two eyes glowing in the night air,
large and horrible, fixed in a demonic stare.
"Run!" Samson cried, and their horses went.
Fleeing they rode, past branches that rent –
their clothes and faces scratched
by branches and leaves that latched.
But in the dark they had left behind,
what do you think there was to find?
Another *Huuu* came from those eyes ghostly,
they belonged to an owl feeling rather morosely.
Up flew away this owl through the moonlight,
To think that this bird could give such a fright!

But to return to our hero –
in his riding where did he go?
Up the craggy mountain path that led to Castle Aster,

up to the very gates of the home of the Count L'Aster.
The gates were huge and tall, and locked securely;
able to withstand an army's battering, surely.

Said the hero to his horse, "My dear faithful friend,
wait here a while, for over this wall I must wend."⁷
Don't worry about me, whether things will get rough;
just be patient, and you'll find I'll be back soon enough."

The horse gave a sad little neigh
as if 'Don't leave me' to say,
but otherwise obeyed her master without question –
she would wait for the end of her master's mission.
The nameless traveller looked at the castle wall,
at the ramparts that towered ever so tall,
and with magic he began to run up that wall,
trusting his power, not fearing to fall.
He run lightly along, up higher and higher,
till over the rampart he jumped, our mystical flier.
Once on the other side he floated down gently,
landing on his feet, touching the ground softly.

Count L'Aster was on his throne, waiting patiently,
for his servants two to bring him Annabel Lee;
he was listening for echoes of howls like thunder
that would precede the return of Gunder and Bunder.
But the doors to his hallway opened unexpectedly,
the nameless traveller stepped through, unhurriedly.

Count L'Aster was first surprised, then gave chuckles,
he made a menacing fist, and *crackle* went his knuckles.
"Now what is this that I see with my eye?
A man with an overwhelming desire to die.
Who is this fool, that dares before me come,

⁷ Wend - to travel

to be reduced by me into a speck of crumb?"

Our hero took of his hat and bowed in greeting,
"Hail, Lord Count, I take pleasure in this meeting.
However, I'm afraid I shall have to take some blame,
for I can't, for varied reasons, reveal to you my name.
Forgive this, for it might seem a trifle rude;
to be without a name is perhaps something crude."

The Count laughed, "It shall be a pleasure
killing someone with bravado in such measure.
But though it be spurious
I am rather curious :
You must tell me, just before you will die,
the reasons for which you came here. Tell my why!"

Our hero stood tall, and straightened his hat,
and with firm voice spoke to the Count where he sat,
"For two reasons I come to before you now stand:
the first is to ask you to stop terrorising this land;
and as for Annabel Lee,
I ask you to leave her be.
The second reason is the one that brought me here,
travelling along, past oceans wide and mountains sheer.
For rumours tell that you're in league with Mordecai,
the great witch-king that rules on the swamps of Orenai.
Of his schemes and his plans I would like to know,
of why he gathers armies by those swamps of woe.
You have taught him spells and sent him gold,
and messengers go forth and back, so I'm told."

To which Count L'Aster replied, "Who are you,
that you would know so much of what I do?
Thank you for coming, thus your life as a gift to me give –
it saves me bother, for you're too dangerous to let live.
But since you are about to die

I see no reason why I should lie
and I shall tell you the story
of our great coming glory :
Know then, that in the depths of the gloom
in the forgotten caverns of his tomb,
lies sleeping and waiting the demon-god Uzoom,
waiting for the chance for a darkness to bloom
that he may rise up and bring men to doom
and as lord and ruler over them loom;
and we shall be there
as his army of despair
and in the world's darkest hour
it is we who shall have the power!
For rulership is the most pleasant of things
and as victors we shall stride the earth as kings,
at the head of our hosts, our army of doom,
we shall battle for the glory of the dark-god Uzoom!
But I grow weary, enough of this talk;
it's time for the hunter his prey to now stalk."

Count L'Aster stood up, his hands glowed red with magic power,
his eyes filled with rage, his face twisted into a lour.⁸
Cursing our hero, he raised up his arms,
reciting the words of dread fearful charms.
Red lightning crackled along each arm
as the vampire prepared our hero to harm;
a magic orb above him came into being,
but it's existence was only but fleeting :
the orb was released with a powerful boom
that echoed through each and every castle room.
The red coloured orb had exploded its form –
the result was a massive red lightning storm,
and all that power that was then revealed
was all of the count's, all of it he did wield;

⁸ Lour - a menacing scowl

and when he pointed his hand towards our hero
all that red lightning towards our hero did go.

But with arms outstretched to catch,
the hero prepared the storm to match.
With his two bold hands he caught the huge storm as if a ball;
the force pushed him back a bit, but such a hero cannot fall.
He threw the storm right back at the spellcaster,
and suddenly overwhelmed was the vampire L'Aster.
He fell backwards into his seat
and struggling to avoid defeat
he held the storm back, with sweat on his furious brow,
rage in his eyes, and muttered curses that he did vow.
With a cry of power the storm off himself he threw
and to the side of the room the lightning then flew,
with a loud blast and a bright red flash
into the wall the lightning did crash.

"You will die!" cried the count, driven insane by rage,
and a terrible power summoned up the mage –
the count was covered in an aura like fire,
readying to give our hero something dire.
Unwilling to give in, for he was so dour,
he threw a bolt of incredible power.

But at the same time our hero threw his sword,
the blade cut through the bolt as if it were a cord –
shattering the bolt as if it were nothing,
the sword cut through, the blade gently singing,
and pushed on by our hero's magic will
the sword kept flying forward still.
And so the sword became a deadly flying dart –
it flew straight and true into the vampire's heart.

Count L'Aster's mouth gurgled with blood
as his knees fell to the ground with a thud.

With shock he gazed at the blade that impaled his dark heart,
that had so easily overcome his fierce magic art.

Though the vampire knew he was about die,
he refused to give in, and would continue to vie.
But from a side door came a look of terror,
for Dundee had come, his eyes sunken with horror.
He had come to find out what was the noise;
now he stood there - now was shaken his poise.

With a great cry Count L'Aster pulled out the blade –
blood spurted from his heart, a great puddle it made.
The count threw the sword to its owner back
hoping that it would serve as a counter attack.
But our hero magically caught the sword in the air –
so easily had he caught it, as if without a care.

"Count L'Aster!" our hero cried, "You do not have to die,
if you'd only desist, we can magic healing try."

But possessed was the count by a vengeful muse :
He would rather die than ever let himself lose.
With words short and terse
he muttered a suicidal curse.

The traveller recognised the spell which was seething,
and cried, "Stop! Do you know what spell you are weaving?
You will bring the castle down on us, you hear!
I care not for myself, but you'll make this your son's bier.
If you care at all for the life of your son,
don't put him in danger, and leave your spell undone!"

But all the vampire count did was to shout, "Die!"
and he released the spell with desperate cry...
At first there was nothing, but then a low rumble,
then the castle shook and began to crumble.

A great piece of stone was falling over Dundee –
Dundee was too mesmerised to notice or flee.
Our hero from his hand threw a magic bolt
that broke that stone with a powerful jolt,
so that only debris
fell upon Dundee.

Coated with dust, Dundee
awoke from his reverie,
and with a heart full of sorrows
for all his orphaned tomorrows,
he turned his gaze upon the traveller,
then uttered the cry, "Murderer!"

Full of anguished hate were Dundee's mad eyes;
forever our hero he would now despise.
Forward he ran to battle with the nameless one,
not caring if he lost, not caring if he won.
Towards our hero ran his path,
fired by an orphan's wrath,
his heart by now seething with rage,
forward he charged to battle engage.
But a huge piece of masonry fell between them;
Dundee jumped back, so a rock the battle did stem.
But beneath the falling rocks was buried the Count L'Aster;
an end to the evil reign of that dreaded spell caster.

Amidst the falling rubble, there was only one way out;
to go anywhere but *upwards* was to invite a rout.
Our hero jumped with a magical leap,
and in order his velocity to keep,
he used as stepping stones the falling debris
and jumped from rock to rock, further up to be.

"Murderer! Come back!" cried the vampire Dundee;
onto the stones he jumped, chasing his enemy.

As their paths crossed jumping their way upwards,
they battled in the midair, like some crazy birds.
Dundee attacked with fury, even while dodging his way;
his fists hungry for battle, his words eager to inveigh.

The nameless traveller took it all into his stride,
easily deflecting Dundee's attacks as he vied;
away the fighting subtly directing
from stones that were on Dundee descending,
and thus protecting Dundee even while battling
and dodging the debris and rocks that came down rattling.

Then there were no more rocks to jump from, suddenly –
the hero and the vampire were over the debris.
For a moment they hovered in the air
and then down they fell, down went the pair;
all the while battling still as they downwards tumbled
and descended back into the castle that crumbled.

The collapse of the castle sent up a great cloud of smoke –
in that dense cloud of dust the battle for a moment broke –
for the two fighters could not see each other, and did choke.
Yet Dundee his flames of vengeance did not fail to stoke,
and would still for revenge the fighting continue,
even while blinded with that dust-clouded hue.

But the dust settled and in the moonlight,
atop the ruins of Castle Aster went on the fight.
Leaping from broken column to tumbled wall,
Dundee kept attacking, giving it his all.
Over the collapsed hallways
and remains of crumbled doorways
they fought barehanded; and our hero his sword sheathed kept -
he did not need to win - as from place to place they leapt.

And so the fight went on, for several hours,

until Dundee was spent, at the end of his powers.
He fell down, for he'd no more strength to stand,
and asked, "I suppose now I shall die by your hand?"

But our noble hero stood near his foe,
not drawing his sword to give a killing blow.
He said, "I see all the good that is in your heart.
I cannot blame you for playing the loyal son's part –
for what would become of society
if there were no such thing as filial piety⁹?
Dundee, I cannot kill you,
for indeed this is true :
You have a compassionate heart, full of virtue.
Your father did not deserve a son like you."

"Do not insult my father!" cried Dundee; he leapt,
trying for one more attack, but our hero sidestepped.
Clawing the ground in frustration and pain,
from exhaustion Dundee fell down again.

The night was almost over, the moon was almost set,
and dawn slowly rose there where the earth and sun had met.
Then the nameless traveller spoke, "I know of sunlight,
a poison to your kind, which is why you wake at night.
You cannot stay out in this bleak open here;
use your last strength to get to a cave somewhere near."

To which Dundee replied, "Know this, although now I am weak –
if you spare my life I shall still my father's vengeance seek.
You destroyed my family, you destroyed my home –
now forever I'll hunt you, wherever you may roam.
I shall seek out those who can grant me new powers;
I shall study and train into many dark midnight hours;
I will not stop until I become strong enough:

⁹ Filial piety - the duties and respect that children owe their parents

to beat you, to fight you, to win these battles rough."

With a sad face our hero said, "Do as you will,
but if you follow me, I fear it will be to your ill."

"Do not think mere threats will keep me back;
I will find you, and in future renew my attack."
Dundee then with his last bit of strength
changed into a bat and flew off at length.
To escape the light of day
he went up and away,
flying up along the mountain side
searching for a cave in which to hide.
Just before dawn's light over the land was brought,
Dundee had managed to find what he sought
and in a sheltered nook he fell deep
into a tired and exhausted sleep.

Annabel Lee was pacing,
waiting anxiously that morning, not knowing
whether her brothers would return
or if the hero had defeated that vampire stern.
She was unable to be calm,
and rubbed fretfully her palm.

Then from out the forest came warriors three;
but she could hardly say they were the brothers Lee :
three men with clothes torn and tattered,
their faces with mud all splattered,
their faces numb with a dazed look,
as if some great torment had them shook;
as if they had survived some great battle
that had tested them to the end of their mettle.

By now all the villagers had come to stare,
and where all now gathering around there.

The three brothers told a horrifying tale
of how they became lost in the forest vale,
stalked by lurking monsters with great big eyes,
who in the dark made horrible *Hu*-like cries;
and there was an incredible thundering sound,
as if a great building had crumbled to the ground –
perhaps it was the sound of a giant's roar –
nevermind what it was, it shook them to the core!
Then, a great cloud of dust descended from the mountainside,
choking them and blinding them, to add misery it plied.
Finally with sunrise they knew which way was east,
and hoping that daylight had scared off the beast,
they managed to find their way back home,
vowing never again to into that dark forest roam.

"Thank the gods, for my brothers are safe at least!
But where is my hero? Did he fall prey to the beast?
Where is the warrior, the one with no name?"
where the words that Annabel then did exclaim.

But she had no need to fear, for carried on the air,
was the sound of humming, of a tune fine and fair.
"It's him!" Annabel cried, and she ran to the sound,
and sure enough as past a corner she turned round,
there was our hero, all clothed black and grim,
a sword by his side, wearing a hat broad of brim.
He was riding atop his steed –
ready for a heroic deed.

The nameless traveller then spoke, "Annabel,
the Count L'Aster is no more and all shall be well.
In ruins now lies the Castle of Aster –
no more shall you hear of its vampire master.
You are now free, and free is your village,
to prosper and work in peace at your tillage.
And now that my task is done,

and good over evil victory has won,
I must be on my way to continue my travel,
always searching for evil plots to unravel.
So now I'm afraid I must goodbye tell,
and wish you, Annabel Lee, a happy farewell."

Then the hero and his steed trotted slowly way,
but Annabel ran after him, so he could his name say.
Half in love with him, she wanted to know:
what was his name, before parting he must go.

But no matter how fast she ran she got no nearer,
some sort of magic was keeping him from her,
so that although they looked like they were at slow trot,
the distance between them, though she ran, would shorten not.
So she gave up the run, and on a spot stayed,
as she listened to his humming begin to fade.
She watched him become smaller from where she stood.
"Good-bye!" she then cried, as loud as she could.
And it seemed the hero heard her,
for a moment he did not go further,
but turned around and waved.

And thus Annabel Lee was saved
by this nameless traveller,
brave like no one other.

This then, was the tale of the defeated vampire master;
of how our hero put an end to the vile spell caster.
But more tales of the traveller have been to me told,
other tales of our hero, so good and so bold.
Many of these tales I have gathered, from far and from near;
And perhaps some other time, I will sing it for your ear!

To be continued in the Industan countries...

A note from the author:

Hi, thanks for reading thus far. The story becomes a lot more exciting from this point on, I hope you enjoy it. Could you do me a favour, in return for having received this story for free? If you enjoy reading this story please tell two people about this ebook and what you enjoyed about it; and if you didn't enjoy it, please drop me a mail at tomek.piorkowski@gmail.com and tell me what didn't work for you. Thanks!

Also remember that 'Ballad of the Nameless Traveller', the unabridged version of this story, is available for purchase as an ebook. For the latest links to where it can be purchased, please visit tomekpiorkowski.com

The unabridged version has numerous deleted scenes and dialogues, an extended prologue, and extended ending with extra characters, and an additional chapter – in total an extra 15,000 words of rhyming epicness!

Anyway, back to the story...

The Ballad of the Traveller in the Industan Countries

Once upon a time
in a tropical clime
two nations faced each other to begin a war –
though none really knew what the invasion was for.
The rajah of Trivanrum, 'twas¹⁰ said, was under a sway –
the sway of his mistress, who thus had her way :
she corrupted the good rajah until came a day
when she convinced him to invade the land of Allepay.
A thousand years of peace was now broken –

¹⁰ 'Twass - short for 'it was'

and the mad demons of war had awoken.

By Rajah Sanvajay 's order beat steady the war drum;
into fields of Allepay marched the hosts of Trivanrum.
"Gold is what we want," whispered his mistress Shirinar,
"and priceless silks and diamonds that can glitter like a star."
Roused gently with sweet words Shirinar had spoken,
greed that had never been was in Sanvajay awoken.
Out of character, he became a warrior bold,
leading his army, thirsting for gold.

"Send me my herald," cried fiercely the Rajah Sanvajay,
"That a message I may send to the lord of Allepay."
The herald came and then was sent –
to the Rajah of Allepay he went.

The lord of Allepay was Rajah Krishnood –
a noble and good king, but volatile of mood.
Down-hearted he was at the prospect of war,
of soldiers ravaging the land he did adore;
he thought of his people who might be killed,
all because one man an invasion had willed.
Sick was he in his heart; he wished for no more
than the prospect of peace and the end of this war.

In the war camp, alone sat Rajah Krishnood,
turning over these thoughts on which he did brood.
Then his son Prince Ashok entered the tent.
He said, "Trivanrum a herald has sent.
Will you hear what he has to say?
Or should I send him away?"

"Let him come in," said Rajah Krishnood,
"Though we now war, there's no need to be rude."

Holding his flag of white, the herald came in

(Prince Ashok on his face wore a malicious grin),
then said, "I come in the name of Rajah Sanvajay;
hear, o mighty Krishnood, of what he has to say :

'Whether there is peace or war, it's now in your hands,
I feel mercy for you and compassion for your lands.
Although we are prepared to fight
through every blood-filled day and night,
I am willing to withdraw and go away
if you are willing a great sum to pay.' "

Great happiness filled Rajah Krishnood's heart,
for he was loath to play the warrior's part.
He cried, "What joy it is to hear of sweet peace!
I'd pay anything for this war to cease."

But Prince Ashok in indignation exclaimed,
"Why should we pay the fine, as if we're to be blamed?
As if we did something wrong, in this, *your* war;
as if we did the heinous deed that all should abhor.
Get out of here and tell your leader, knave,
that we spit on his lunatic rave!..."

"Silence, boy!" cried Krishnood,
"How dare you be so rude!
How dare you interfere with matters of state?
Get out of this tent, and outside you wait!"
Wrath was on the moody rajah's face;
the prince bowed to him, and left the place.

The rajah stood up, with joy in his eye;
so happy he was, he almost began to cry.
"Forgive my impetuous son, and ignore his speech;
Who can refuse such a sweet accord to reach?
He is hot-headed, eager for war flags to unfurl,
not knowing that peace is the most precious of pearl.

Go back to your master, and tell him I agree;
what is gold, if from bloodshed we can be free?
He can have what he wants in a trice;
for surely peace is worth any price."
So the men of the army of Trivanrum
furled the war flag and put aside the war drum,
and marched their way home, laden with spoil –
bought with threats, with hardly any toil.

Rajah Sanvajay laughed, throwing coins in the air,
the palace barely had space to keep the treasure there –
the treasury was overfull, open were its doors,
so that gold and jewels littered the palace floors.

Sanvajay had three children, and they were dismayed,
to see that their father by Shirinar was so easily played.
Prince Arrand, Princess Aren, Prince Araneet;
to discuss their fears, they gathered to meet.

Prince Arrand was the eldest and heir to Trivanrum's throne,
"Once, I was glad that our father was no longer alone,"
said Prince Arrand, "But that witch, Shirinar,
is making him a puppet; she's gone too far!
In this needless invasion of Allepey we risked all,
if we'd been defeated, Trivanrum would've had to fall.
Yet by the moody Rajah Krishnood's caprice
we by luck instead managed his nation to fleece."

Prince Araneet then wished to speak,
"Of rot does our palace home reek.
Our father plays with Shirinar while our country decays,
taxes ever go higher - it's the peasant who then pays –
the people of our nation become poorer every day
as our nation falls further under Shirinar's sway.
Now I have news that rebellion stalks the land,
Lord Falcon of the Border has shown his hand.

Aided by that fierce old wizard Ezzadane
he has rebelled against our father's reign,
all the rajah's tax collectors throwing out
to protect his people - thus begins the bout.
Yet despite this flagrant disobedience
our father displays only indolence.
He cares not if our nation comes to harm -
all he cares for is Shirinar's charm."

"The Border's nothing, the danger's here," said Princess Aren.
"Who knows what evil rituals that witch works in her den.
My own magic arts are unable her work to discover,
her den is locked to me, I can't her rituals uncover.
Her strange apprentice, who clothes himself all in red,
only comes out at night, as if he were an undead.
Why do they order so much pig's blood from the butchery?
Are evil plans made? What secrets are in their sorcery?"

"By the ground on which I stand,
I fear for our nation," said Prince Arrand.

Meanwhile, the rajah, his war brought to an abrupt end,
called for Shirinar and his servants away he did send.
Shirinar came, and he pulled her gently into his arms.
He was so glad to be alone, alone with her charms;
he pulled her softly onto his bed
and kissed her lips of crimson red,
gently put his hand upon her head,
and whisperingly to her said,
"My love, my love, my love, ask of this sire;
ask what you will, ask anything you desire."

She only laughed and pulled herself away
and poured out some wine laid out on a tray;
but the wine to slake the rajah's thirst
was with Shirinar's black magic cursed -

with each hidden potion and hidden spell
the rajah more under her power fell.
For a long time Shirinar had done this trick -
his love for her was mostly due to her magic.

So it was that the beautiful but cunning Shirinar
mixed her black magic potion within the rajah's wine jar.
Seven drops of her aphrodisiac she gave -
enough to make a ruler her willing slave.
The tainted chalice she put to her rajah's lip
and the unknowing rajah drank every tainted sip.
She then whispered, "Of this humble slave, my noble sire,
you ask her of what it is that she may desire?
I will tell you that there in the land of Allepay,
Krishnood has hidden all of his treasures away.
What we received in our war was but a trifle,
a little morsel in order a dragon to stifle.
The rest remains in the greedy hands of Krishnood -
he dared to keep his gold, he dared to be so rude!
Rajah of Trivanrum, show him who is master here -
march into Allepay, and make him tremble with fear!
Take what is rightfully yours, take all his gold!
Take it for me, my warrior so bold -
and when the land of Allepay beneath you does fold,
bedeck me in gold, that I be a sight to behold.
This shall make my joy fly higher and higher -
my lord and master, that is what I desire."

Rajah Sanvajay exclaimed in surprise,
"From where does this request of yours arise?
What madness is this that dances on your tongue?
In what fevered dream was this idea first sung?
Only just now I came back from a war -
now I hear you say 'Not enough! I want more!'
For a thousand years, conflict did not arise -
when I invaded, Krishnood was taken by surprise

and victory was easy to take –
although much of my bluster was fake
and if Krishnood had only fought
who knows what fate would have wrought?
Now he is surely prepared, with his armies ready:
the border they guard and they stand to repel me.
Who'd win another war? To whom would fate victory give?
Who would be the one to die falling, who would stand and live?
Shirinar, cease talk of the madness of war –
rather another glass of wine for me pour."

Shirinar smiled, and poured her lord more of the tainted wine.
She watched him drink it, as she next to her lord did recline;
her sweet-eyed look hiding her heart's darkness so cold.
She waited for the magic wine to take renewed hold –
then she whispered, "Darling, the path is clear.
Victory is yours, why do you fear?
Listen to me : there are many passes to Allepay.
At one pass there is but one fortress that guards the way -
I believe the people say it's called the fort of Mandalay.
It sits between the river Gangin and thick jungle,
inhabited by fearsome beasts such as the grungle,
and the trees are so dense the jungle is impassable.
It would seem that to take the fort would be impossible –
for in front it is wide and huge and strong of wall,
the sides are defended by the river and jungle tall –
only if it was abandoned could it then fall,
the soft innards of Allepay then open to maul.
Krishnood is so greedy, I believe his soldiers are poor;
all that is needed is some trifle to use as a lure –
and since now we have all this gold
let us use it to make a fortress sold.
Bribe the defenders, let them take their leave;
let us march forth in glory! Let Krishnood grieve!"

The wine by now had gone to the rajah's head;

his eyes lit up with fury, he jumped and said,
"That villain! How dare he trick me so!
He shall rue the day he made me his foe!
He fooled me, giving only a tiny bit of his wealth –
how gullible I was, taken in by this piece of stealth!"
Consumed with anger (or madness) as never before,
Rajah Sanvajay once again felt the yearning for war.

Rajah Sanvajay called all those trusted by him –
he called them to council, his eyes violent and grim.
The rajah sat on his royal throne most grand;
beside him his lover Shirinar did stand;
before him his ministers and his children three,
ready to hear him speak his royal decree:

"Be aware that Krishnood has stained my honour,
and vengeance is for what my heart does clamour.
Stir up my armies, stir up each warrior's heart,
raise up your shields and polish each sharpened dart!
For now once more
we shall go to war
and then behold how before this army of Trivanrum's
the forces of Allepay shall dissolve into crumbs!"

All those present felt a great shock
but before anyone could take stock,
Princess Aren immediately cried,
"Curse the day that wisdom and reason died!
Ever since that witch has come to your side
you have failed to see how she has lied and lied.
Has Shirinar plucked your very eyes from your head,
that you're unable to see how our nation has bled?
I've had enough! It is time to end that witch!"

Aren then against Shirinar a spell did pitch.
Raising her arms she summoned a giant eagle

that arose like a phoenix, all fire and regal;
it sped across the throne room, towards Shirinar it flew,
the eagle's claws grasping for the kill as nearer it drew.

"You wretch!" Shirinar shrieked, and she cast a charm
by shouting magic words and twisting her arm –
then arose from the ground a giant magic snake
that struck with its fangs, the eagle's life to take.
The bird twisted aside, but it had no luck;
deep into its neck that serpent's fangs struck.
The eagle gave out a screeching cry,
then it vanished from sight; So did it die.

Then the mystic snake forward lunged –
through the air its mighty body plunged.
It went for Aren just like a battering ram;
the Princess Aren hit the wall with a *slam!*
The snake pinned Aren's body against the wall,
its mouth opened wide, fangs ready to fall.

"Kill her!" did the wicked Shirinar cry –
but just as Aren was about to die
the rajah stood up and ordered, "Hold!"
And the moment the commandment was told
Shirinar's magical gestures stopped
and the magical snake, dying, flopped
and vanished into nothingness.
With nothing holding up the princess,
off the wall
she did fall
and hit the ground with a cry –
and there in pain she did lie.

"Traitor to my heart!" cried the rajah in his wrath,
"Who'd have thought that you would walk down this path?
How dare my own daughter try to strike the woman I love?

From now on you are confined to your room - by Gods above!
If you so much as stick your littlest toe through your door
you'll find your decapitated head rolling on the floor!
Guards! Take her away! Put her under arrest!"
The guards did so, obeying the rajah's behest.
On that note ended the meeting,
the rajah's heart angrily beating.

Prince Araneet spoke to his brother as they walked;
his voice sounded pensive, as to Arrand he talked :
"What can we do, in order this devious plan to foil?
Our sister is arrested, the nation is in turmoil.
Let the two of us run away
out of Shirinar's evil sway,
till we figure out some plan to save our beloved land
through the wisdom of the mind and valour of the hand."

But Prince Arrand would not to this agree –
he shook his head, and in reply said he,
"We should obey our father, even though we disagree;
this is what is referred to as filial piety.
We princes are an example to the nation –
should we encourage children to forget their station?"

Araneet replied, "I do not forget society,
and the importance of all the rules of propriety;
but what is the point of serving our father the king
when he is under the shadow of Shirinar's wing?
I refuse - and so I shall go to meet Lord Falcon,
and with him and Ezzadane and my falchion,¹¹
we shall make amends for what Shirinar has done
and by my blood we shall not rest till we have won!"

"Then go!" Prince Arrand then cried,

¹¹ Falchion - a sword

"Run and in the Borderlands hide!

Our nation is about to burn to a cinder
and so I will neither help you nor hinder,
for I cannot see anymore who is wrong or right –
the world has gone mad, I know not which enemy to fight."
And so they parted, and young Araneet rode out that night;
while the elder prince polished his sword, ready for the fight.

Meanwhile in the court of Allepay,

Rajah Krishnood had this to say:

"How joyful it is, when the clamour of war does cease!
How wonderful it is, to live in blessed times of peace!"

To which his son Prince Ashok replied like this,

"If only I, like you, could see nothing amiss,
and join you in your pleasant revelries.
But there is no more gold in our treasuries,
and our state schools and hospitals have had to close;
now there is among our people much of tears and woes.
The royal throne no longer plays its filial role
by placing the old and the childless on the dole;
as for orphans, we are no longer their help –
for we have no gold to shelter the abandoned whelp,
and the orphanages go hungry.

But if you think my complaints are too sundry,
I will pick the one that frightens me most of all –
one that most makes me fear our nation will fall:
Many fortresses Allepay has, armed by soldiers strong –
we bought this peace for them, only now we do them wrong.
For months Allepay's warriors have not been paid,
not a single coin of salary have they made.
Do you expect our borders to be secured for free?
Do you realize how open we are to the enemy?
Surely by historians we shall as fools be held –

as like all other fools who buy peace with dane-geld!¹²"

His son's speech only raised Krishnood's ire,
Krishnood's eyes blazed as if alight with fire.
He angrily stood up from his throne and roared out,
in a voice that bellowed and echoed about,
"Since you are so concerned about borders and war,
then out with you boy! And go do for me this chore :
go to those places you speak of, speak to the soldiers there.
You shall find out what they really think... Now get out of here!"

So in an ill mood the rajah and his son parted.
Prince Ashok his tour of inspection thus started,
armed with his sword, arrows and famous bow;
and one faithful servant, Ranjit, in tow.
He decided that his first stop on the way
would be the border fortress of Mandalay,
that sat between the river Gangin mightily flowing,
and the jungle full of frightful cries that were foreboding.

Meanwhile, the soldiers at Mandalay were brooding,
speaking words full of bile, bitter and unsoothing.
"To have died in a war would have been better,
than to live in this peace, that hangs like a fetter.
Our stomachs are empty and our families are shaken –
they accuse us of having left them to be forsaken.
We are so hungry we feel like eating our armour;
a pity we did not die in war, fighting with ardour.
Better to be dead than through such misery to strive,
to feel this hunger in our stomachs eating us alive.
Where is our gold, that thing we hold most dear;
gold, for which we pretend that we have no fear;
gold, which bends us to our rajah's will,
for his sake to die, for his sake to kill?"

¹² Dane-geld - money which is extorted under the threat of war

The soldiers were speaking in such a way –
grumbling and grumbling about their pay,
when a mysterious messenger arrived at their gate.
Was it Ashok? No, but someone else, who had this to state:

"As Trivanrum's envoy I have come,
with gold for you of a great sum.
Why suffer in poverty in serving Allepay,
when you can share in all the gold I've brought today?"
And sure enough, behind this diplomat from foreign parts
was a legion of servants pushing forward many carts,
with jewels and rubies and gems and gold –
a glittering sight for all to behold!

The captain of the soldiers forward came,
and to the envoy did he thus exclaim,
"A soldier that is not well used
is a soldier that is well abused.
Our rajah does not have the good sense to keep us well,
and so we languish in a sort of starving hell.
Why should we not listen to you?
Tell us what you would have us do."
And the envoy orders for them gave :
"If you this gold do at all crave,
then listen to me, and I shall speak with candour.
You must leave here all your weapons and armour,
and abandon this fortress within a day;
share out the gold, and go whichever way –
leave your posts - go back to your home,
or else wander about and roam;
it doesn't matter, as long as this fortress empty stands.
Tomorrow, this fortress shall be in Trivanrum's hands!

And did the warriors say no, these men of Allepay?
In fact: they all agreed - they all became traitors that day!

The captain divided up the gold (according to rank)
and then the treacherous soldiers were happy, to be frank,
for at last they again felt their life was worthwhile.
They left all their weapons behind in a pile,
and marched out in some sort of an order –
left unguarded then was that stretch of border!
The envoy returned back from where he had been sent –
to rejoin his rajah's army, on invasion bent.

Rajah Sanvajay's warriors were about to march –
ten thousand men were to pass beneath his city gate's arch.
Just before the army was about to leave,
Shirinar - who always had something up her sleeve,
for she was a lady without any compunctions –
was giving to her apprentice some parting instructions :

"Dundee, I was sent here by Mordecai,
Witch-king of the swamps of the Orenai,
for two reasons: firstly, to sow discord and confusion,
so that among his foes there could be no collusion –
to weaken the nations of Allepay and Trivanrum
that they shall fall when Mordecai's army will marching come.
The second reason is to study the lore of the land,
in order the secrets of magic to understand;
for Mordecai seeks to resurrect the dark god Uzoom,
and needs the forgotten rituals that open his tomb.
These scattered spells lie buried in ancient tomes
hiding in various libraries and homes.
So I have been studying demonology
from sources both worthy and dodgy.

"What I've learnt shows Mordecai to be a fool –
he wishes to use the demon god as his tool.
But Uzoom is no small devil, easy to be controlled;
I suspect Mordecai's plans the wrong way will unfold.
I would not toy with a being so terrible and grim –

but no matter - of what we found, I have not told him,
that a copy of the book of Eibon we've recovered,
and that therein many arcane secrets we've discovered.

"To hell with the witch-king! I rule the Rajah Sanvajay;
his army is strong, and I shall soon rule Allepay.
Trivanrum's might, together with the book of Eibon,
shall make me strong enough to face Mordecai head on.

"Now, my apprentice, you must listen to what I say :
I have been drugging Princess Aren's meals every day,
and by now she's in stuporous state,
lost in a daze which never does abate.
When the time is right we can use her as a sacrifice,
to summon demon Eibon - a human life is the price
that shall bring him back from the gloom
of the netherworld that forms his tomb.
While I am gone you must continue adding the potion,
to continue to dumb her mind and blunt her emotion.
Do this while I accompany Rajah Sanvajay –
for I must ensure he remains under my sway,
that he remains mine while there in Allepay."
This then, was what Shirinar had to say.

Soon thereafter, marching to the beat of the drum,
went forth the ten thousand man army of Trivanrum.
At the same time, that noble prince of Allepay,
Prince Ashok, was just arriving at Mandalay.
Noble he looked, as on his horse he did sit,
followed by his faithful servant called Ranjit.
The gate of the fortress creaked open wide,
within those gates an eerie silence did bide.
Ashok was puzzled, and into the fort he did ride,
his eyes full of bewilderment, gazing opened wide.
The fortress was empty, there was not even a ghost;
no sergeant shouting orders, no sentry at his post.

Weapons and arrows were scattered about on the ground.
In the stillness the nearby jungle echoing did sound –
as if to speak of Ashok's dismay,
a far-off grundle to the sky did bay.

The prince from his horse dismounted
and feeling utterly downhearted,
he stumbled towards the fortress gate
where he felt his strength suddenly abate.
As the prince fell upon his knee,
he cried, "Glory to the enemy!
They have defeated us before the battle has begun;
not a single sword unsheathed and already they have won!
The way through here to the capital is open wide –
an army could go frolicking through our countryside.
There is no way our defences can be mended,
if this fortress stands here undefended.
Ranjit, bring me my sword, let me take my own life here;
compared with this disaster, death is nothing to fear."

"Master!" cried the servant Ranjit,
"Surely what you say is not fit!
We must do what we can to cope –
as long as there is life, there is hope!"

Ashok replied "Ranjit! To win against these kinds of odds
would require the intervention of the very gods!"
In his anger Ashok kicked at the ground.

"Master, please tame your fury, I hear a sound!
I fear it may be the coming of our foe!"

They listened, but they heard not some omen of woe;
rather, they heard the merry sound of a song,
so joyful, as if in the world there were no wrong.
But the song served to stir up Prince Ashok's wrath –

he took his bow and ran outside onto the path,
to confront the song which mocked his despair
and to face the singer with a wild eyed stare.

Upon the path winding to Mandalay,
Ashok saw a man, coming up the way.
Atop a noble black mare did the stranger ride;
he wore a hat, and a mighty sword was at his side.
In the jungle heat, although he wore a cloak of black,
he did not sweat at all, at ease he rode along the track.
Fiercely red were the flashing eyes of his majestic steed,
as if watching for the chance to do some courageous deed.
From the horserider's throat came the happy sound
of a song about all the joys that can be found.

Prince Ashok put an arrow to his bow
while a look of wrath creased his forehead low,
and he cried, "How dare you insult my misery
by going along and singing so merrily?
I, Prince Ashok of Allepay, order you to silence -
or else you shall have to face my arrow's violence!"

The black-clad stranger seemed not at all to hear –
he kept singing as if there was nothing to fear.
The horse stopped to look at Ashok with an angry glare,
as if asking the prince of Allepay his threats to dare.
But all this served only to raise Ashok's ire –
his anger flared within his heart like a fire.
He pulled at his bowstring and let loose a dart
with an aim straight and true at the stranger's heart.

The arrow sped through the air
but as if without a care,
our nameless hero snatched the dart as it flew
(Not only that, but he kept on singing too!).
Between his fingers the traveller twirled the arrow,

then he stopped singing in order to address his foe,
"I have heard on my travels several rumours that say:
there's no greater archer than Prince Ashok of Allepay.
Judging from the way you handle your arrow and your bow,
I'd say it is Prince Ashok who now tries to be my foe.
Noble Prince of Allepay, one who is strong and true,
thanks for lending me your dart - I now give it back to you."

The nameless stranger then the arrow gently threw;
Prince Ashok caught it by the shaft as it flew.
Then the prince gave a laugh, and cried out in mirth,
"So easily have you figured out my birth!
Forgive me for attacking you with such spite –
even in my distress, what I did was not right.
I reckon, from the way you managed to pluck an arrow –
so swiftly sent singing through the air from my mighty bow –
you must be a warrior-mage of great renown
with a name famous in each and every town."

"Actually - I know this may sound a little lame,"
said the hero, "but I do my best not to have a name.
I have good reasons for being so mysterious –
regarding my name, please do not be too curious.
But if you do not mind my own curiosity -
tell me of why you are in such despondency
that you are such a terrible danger
to every passing singing stranger?"

At this question a tear came to Ashok's eye;
he said, "Let me tell you of how I must die:
this fortress which here lies abandoned and empty and still
is the gateway through which shall be wrought havoc and ill.
Surely Trivanrum is marching to this place
knowing that there is no guard for them to face;
then from here, carried by the cries of their own elation,
they will dismember and destroy and conquer my nation!"

Our nameless hero got off his horse,
and said, "Well then, as a matter of course,
it's up to us to stop this army of Trivanrum
when they to our fortress here do marching come.
Cheer up old prince. Together,
we shall win this endeavour.
Let your servant there take my steed –
there is no horse that can match her speed –
and let him race back to the capital
on the back of my wonderful animal.
Once he is over there
he can firmly declare
that in this dire emergency
troops should be sent with urgency.
Then while we wait for reinforcements
we shall ourselves hold these battlements.
Together, we shall keep the enemy at bay
with the help of the mighty walls of Mandalay!"

Prince Ashok laughed, and exclaimed, "You are quite mad!
But death is sweeter when there is glory to be had!
Although there is certainly no hope
for two men against an army to cope,
I'd rather die here than in the ruins of Allepay –
I'll fight to my last breath defending fortress Mandalay!"

Prince Ashok then instructed his servant Ranjit
to take our hero's horse and to travel with it.
The brave steed seemed sad, and sighed with a neigh,
as if she didn't want to go away,
but would rather stay by her heroic master's side;
nevertheless, she would obey and to Allepay ride.
She gave an arrogant and proud snort at Ranjit,
as if ordering the servant upon her to sit.
Ranjit mounted the amazing horse;

and then like a thunderous force
the heroic mare took off at an incredible speed –
it was more like a hurricane than the trot of a steed!
Ranjit desperately held on, clinging for life;
he thought of his children, and of his beloved wife,
and of how much he really did not want to die –
so terrifying was the speed the horse did fly!

Prince Ashok was utterly aghast –
never had he seen a horse so fast!
For a while he was at a loss for speech
until our hero did the prince beseech :
“I think it’s time to get the fortress ready,
so that our defence can be strong and steady.”

From this the prince did not shirk –
they got right down to work.
The arrows that were left behind were piled here and there
so that the prince could reload his bow almost anywhere;
they mended the fortress wall and fixed some barricades
as a challenge to any enemy cavalcades;
they swapped encouraging words and also sharpened their swords,
and discussed how to make their stand against Trivanrum’s hordes:
Since the fortress Mandalay stood twixt¹³ jungle and river,
it made attack from the sides a difficult endeavour;
so they decided to focus on defending the front,
which was likely to take the enemy army’s full brunt.
Prince Ashok was to stand on top of the fortress wall –
from where his arrows could rain from Mandalay’s ramparts tall;
while the nameless traveller would be down below –
by the fortress gate our hero would meet the foe.
They finished working at nightfall; they then thought it best,
to take turns: one to keep guard, the other to rest.

¹³ Twixt – between

Meanwhile, the ending of a long, tiring day
brought rest to the army of Rajah Sanvajay.
The rajah had ordered his army to halt for the night –
after a day's march, his soldiers found rest a delight.
Eventually, the sun cast its morning ray
to announce the coming of a glorious day,
with a hopeful clear blue sky –
but for whom was the hope, by the bye?
Was it for the army of Rajah Sanvajay?
Or for our heroes at fortress Mandalay?

Quickly the army was roused –
every campfire was doused;
the tents were hastily packed
and the mules with luggage stacked.
Soon, the army of Trivanrum was ready,
to march to the sounds of the drumbeat steady,
so forward went the army on its way
to a fateful encounter at Mandalay.

In good order marched the army's ranks –
within hours they reached Gangin's banks;
that wide and forbidding river that cut right through
the jungle and splits the jungle into two.
From within the jungle wilds sounds came screeching –
the wail of the chimp and the snipe's distant screaming;
while the river's surface, which seemed so still,
hid the fierce drowning depths, ready to do ill.
Between the jungle and river
ran the road like a sliver;
the road was well built and wide,
the best way to safely stride,
for one never knew if one would survive in the jungle –
marching through it, one could become meat for the grungle!
Up ahead the road was suddenly short
for it stopped at the gate of a mighty fort.

The order was sent for some infantry to march
for the glory of Trivanrum through its gateway arch.

As they approached, the fortress gate slowly became open –
and through it stepped a man, with a sword as his weapon.
Handsome was his face, but fierce was his eye –
to fight him, one had to be ready to die!
The soldiers stopped marching, unsure what to do;
they gazed in surprise at this man in their view.
The soldiers marching in the rear bumped the ones in the front –
there was disarray, everyone their places had to hunt!
The army then stood still, watching our hero with care;
none of them a fight with our great hero would dare!
Never had they seen one with such confidence,
one who seemed to treat fear with indifference.
There was something about him, noble and great,
that made them stop marching, to stand and wait.
Suddenly, the hero took a bold step forward,
with such a fierce look that the soldiers stepped backward,
bumping all their comrades behind –
so fearful where they of mind!

Their commanding general rode up from the rear.
“You fools! Why do you stop? Why do you tremble in fear?”
His hair was wild, his manner was fierce,
he waved his sword as if ready to pierce.
His soldiers were almost as afraid of him,
as of our great hero standing tall and grim.
With fright they told their general the news
of what had come into their trembling views.

“Cowards! Fools! I will show you what you must do!”
Roared the general, and as if that was the cue,
forward through the ranks sped his horse;
straight for the hero was set his course.

The horse galloped, the rider was full of bravado;
clearly he was ignorant to face such a foe.
Our hero calmly unsheathed his sword and forward stepped,
then with supernatural force he gracefully leapt, s
oaring through the air, his blade flashing bright;
soaring like an eagle, straight for the fight.
The general swung his sword at this air-borne attack,
but his technique, unfortunately, skill did lack.
The nameless hero easily dodged the swing,
and our hero's sword through the air did sing,
and cut right through the general's neck!
The man's head flew, spurting blood like a beck!¹⁴
It flew right into the army's left flank,
spreading terror down the army's rank!
Meanwhile, the masterless horse had veered to the right,
the headless body rode on it still, what a sight!
Past the army's right the horse then rode,
and fright then the soldier's faces showed!
Now it was from the right flank
that fear spread down the army's rank!
Very soon those soldiers would have all run away,
if from behind the ranks a noble voice did not say,
"Stand with me, men, and do not fear!
Your prince now stands among you here!"

Noble and true was that voice –
the soldiers obeyed out of choice,
and their hearts and minds became resolved to stand
alongside their admired prince, the prince Arrand.
Prince Arrand strode to the front, his bearing was regal,
as if he were among swallows, and he was the eagle.
His sword was by his side, and courage was in his eyes;
He cried out, "Who is it that my army dare defies?"

¹⁴ Beck – a small stream

In answer an arrow flew from the sky,
aimed for the prince's heart to make him die;
But Arrand drew his sword with incredible speed,
like lightening his blade answered its master's need,
and the arrow was beaten aside;
but suddenly a booming voice cried,
"It is I,
who dare defy!"

The army looked up the fortress wall, in shock;
for they saw the fierce countenance of Prince Ashok!
His face was like unto a tiger's, his teeth gnashed with hate,
as he readied a new arrow to fly towards its fate.
The first was barely out the bow, when he shot another –
three arrows he quickly shot, one straight after the other!

Arrand, as if without a care,
leapt upwards into the air,
and with his skilful sword shredded all the darts
so that they harmlessly fell to the ground in parts.
Then, as he was a warrior of incredible skill,
he was able to, by the force of his magical will,
to fly up to the fortress wall's top;
and after this magical hop,
Prince Arrand spoke thus to Prince Ashok,
"Who is it that dares myself to mock?"

"I am the Prince of Allepay, you truce-breaking wretch!
Now stand still, for a new treaty on your face I would etch!"
These two great warriors then fought on that fortress wall;
Twenty fearsome rounds they fought, giving it their all.
The soldiers of Trivanrum were inspired by the fight
and to the fortress they charged to prove Trivanrum's might,
but the nameless traveller faced the armed charging horde
and with amazing martial skill fought them with his sword.
So the battle raged, two warriors above while below,

an army tried to match the nameless hero as a foe.
After five more rounds, Ashok gave such an attack
that Prince Arrand ended up falling and stumbling back;
Ashok saw an opening, and launched an offense,
against which Arrand could not raise a defence;
Ashok's blade into Arrand's belly did scud,¹⁵
and when the blade withdrew, out flowed Prince Arrand's blood!

But Arrand, though wounded, would not give in –
He kept on fighting, vowing to win.
Meanwhile, the nameless hero effortlessly pushed back
the Trivanrum soldiers' sincere attempts to attack.
For as many as they were, and try as they might,
they could not defeat the traveller in their fight;
The hero so easily defended the fortress gate,
that the soldiers' enthusiasm began to abate.

Above, swords continued to flash
as the princes went on with their clash.
For several rounds they were equally matched,
and fierce blow after blow was hotly dispatched.
But Prince Arrand was desperately needing
some care for his wound which was constantly bleeding.
Eventually he lost so much of his blood
that he swayed like a boat lost in a flood.
Encouraged, Ashok became even more busy,
throwing blow after blow, till Arrand's head was dizzy –
finally Arrand dropped his sword, and gave a hopeless yell;
Backwards he swooned, and over the edge of the wall he fell!
Some loyal soldiers below had been alarmed by the shout,
and had seen how their noble prince had lost in the bout;
Surely, the fall would have to the prince his death had brought;
But he was saved by his men: in their arms the prince they caught.
Then with their prince the men quickly rushed away;

¹⁵ Scud – to move smoothly and quickly

And the army too, retreated in disarray –
by their foes they were so demoralised,
that they ran away so disorganised!

The men took their prince to where doctors could attend to him;
The doctors quickly stopped the bleeding from the wound so grim.
The Rajah Sanvajay came to see his son –
for himself he saw what to his child had been done.
The rajah then said, “Now do I know what is in store,
when one nation another engages in war.
What good is it to conquer three nations like Allepay,
if I have to lose my son somewhere along the way?”
Trivanrum’s rajah decided to take his son home,
and not over foreign lands with an army to roam.

Shirinar was angry, and pretended to cry.
She said to the rajah, “Why did you have to lie?
I thought you loved me but now you want to turn and run,
to leave your boasts unfulfilled and all our work undone!
If you must return home to nurse your son, then go –
but leave your army with me, that I may face the foe!”

And so the Rajah, meaning to please her,
made her his army’s commander and leader.
The next morning, he and some men escorted his son –
their roles in our battle were now finished and done.
Meanwhile, Shirinar coloured herself with paint
so that she looked like some dreaded war saint,
and riding as leader of Trivanrum’s military,
Shirinar certainly did not look ordinary!
She thought to herself, ‘This is the way it should be,
with myself leading the army personally.
Never mind the Rajah Sanvajay, he is a fool;
It is up to me to be the one who will truly rule!’
Armed with her magic staff she led the army on its way
back to the gates of Allepay’s fortress Mandalay.

Yet again there stood the traveller, tall and fearless –
our hero, strong and virtuous, noble and peerless!
(Meanwhile, Allepay's Prince Ashok was fast asleep,
and the reason for his being in slumbers deep
was that he the long midnight guard shift had undertaken –
with so little sleep it was a struggle to awaken!)
Shirinar rode forth and cried, "You wretch of a wight¹⁶!
Let's see how good you really are in a fight!"

From her staff she launched a magical blast
that flew towards the hero, blazing and fast.
It struck our hero, and engulfed him in a flame –
Oh no! Was that the end of the hero with no name?
Of course not! For although Shirinar anticipated
to see the hero dead when the blast dissipated,
the nameless traveller emerged unscathed
(though the ground around him with scorch marks was bathed!)

Aghast, Shirinar said, "This is no ordinary man:
against this foe, I'll need a different kind of plan."
So Shirinar flew up into the air –
from the sky an attack she wanted to dare.
But the nameless traveller jumped up too,
and swiftly right beside her he also flew!
Horried, Shirinar to hit him with her staff tried,
which our hero with his sheathed sword batted aside –
thus an aerial fight began
which for ten or so deadly rounds ran.
Shirinar's staff gave off sparks as they exchanged blows,
while the troops below watched in awe the battling foes.
And although Shirinar's many blows were meant to kill –
our hero laughed and kept his sword in its sheath still!

As the clash continued on without pause or break,

¹⁶ Wight – a person

the noise they made finally shook Prince Ashok awake.
When he saw the enchantress in the air he took his bow
and then he loosed an arrow to fly swiftly at the foe.
But Shirinar's magic senses the coming arrow felt;
She twisted and fired a bolt that made the arrow melt!
But she lost her concentration, and then she was falling –
as her ability to multi-task was appalling
(It is rather hard, by-the-bye,
to fight, melt arrows *and* fly!)
In an undignified manner she fell to the ground.
She landed, tumbled, but then stood up safe and sound.
Meanwhile, our nameless hero of great renown,
also returned to land, floating gently down.

“Wretch!” Shirinar cried, “I’ll make you rue this hour!
Watch as I reveal the full extent of my power!
Against you I shall summon a golem made of stone,
a demon of the rocky earth called Boh Da Thone.
As for your sneaky arrow flinging friend
I’ve a plan to make him too meet his end.
But first, let the earth beneath us groan;
Let every stone and pebble moan,
in time with this spell that I intone!
Rise, rise from your throne oh dread Boh Da Thone!
Let mud be your flesh! Let rock be your bone!
Arise to my summons, demon of the stone!”

Then the ground began to rumble
as if the very earth did grumble;
Rock and sand moved in a dusty whirlwind of cloud,
and mud flew from the riverbank with splashings so loud;
All these things coalesced into a miniature storm
which hardened and turned into a giant monstrous form:
A great ogre made of rock, with eyes blazing like fire,
ready to fulfil Shirinar's evil desire!

But Shirinar was not finished with her magical plot –
two dragons, one blue and cold, the other red and hot,
were summoned from I know not where,
materialising from thin air!
The blue dragon flew over the river Gangin
and roared its frosty breath (it made quite a din);
Even in that jungle the cold made one shiver,
and soon, into ice had turned that portion of river!
While the waters of the Gangin were being made to freeze
the other dragon was flying over the jungle trees
and with a blast of flame turned into a cinder
a whole area of unlucky jungle timber!
After having the area so ravished,
the magical dragons then both vanished.

After all this impressive magic
Shirinar felt exhausted and sick
and she almost fainted down,
but instead she said with a frown,
“Now witness what to you two I have meted;
I shall now stand back and watch you be defeated!
My army shall split in two, each part shall attack a side,
while from the front, Boh Da Thone shall rip apart your hide!”

Trivanrum’s army divided into twain¹⁷,
and marched forth to attack the fortress again.
Over the river of ice part of the army marched,
while on the other side, it was through the burnt land so parched.
Ashok saw that the fort was being attacked on each side.
Do you think that he decided to run away and hide?
Never! Ashok gritted his teeth and loaded his bow
and leapt from one side to the other, engaging the foe;
As he flew through the air he loosed arrow upon arrow-
into the Lives of men it was Death that the prince did sow!

¹⁷ Twain - two

Meanwhile, Shirinar ordered the stone demon to attack;
Boh Da Thone lumbered forward to bring about this wrack.¹⁸
The demon wanted to crush the traveller with one blow
(for its fist was huge enough to batter a lesser foe).
Down came the stone demon's mighty giant arm,
trying to inflict drastic physical harm.

But our noble hero blocked the attack
with such a force that the ogre stumbled back!
Enraged, the demon Boh Da Thone once again lunged,
and so into a mighty fight were they plunged;
And while our hero with the giant wrestled,
Ashok with the army successfully battled!

Shirinar had counted on some easy victories –
but she had not considered heroes such as these!
For two days and two nights she had to direct the attack,
and not for one moment did our mighty heroes slack!
She divided her troops
into several groups
so that they could take it in turns to attack and to sleep –
but Ashok tirelessly pushed them back from the keep!
During all that time, the nameless hero managed this feat –
the demon Boh Da Thone could not our hero beat!

But as the third day of battle came
Ashok's arm felt increasingly lame
as a heavy exhaustion set in –
yet he vowed to either die, or win.

Meanwhile, the traveller's fight was almost done –
indeed, the hero should long ago have won,

¹⁸ Wrack – destruction

if Shirinar had not constantly
strengthened the demon magically.
Though the demon's great fists were made of rock,
the hero with his strong arms the blows did block
till the moment arose for a blow
that would end this fight with his foe.
Our nameless (but wonderful) hero called out a spell
that made his fist glow as upon the demon it fell
and as if lightening had hit the ground
there was a blast of light and of sound;
The stone demon let out a roar
as the magic punch ripped through its core
and into pieces the monster tore –
then demon Boh Da Thone was no more!

The army of Trivanrum was by now scaling the wall,
and Ashok was barely managing to make them stall.
The prince felt all was lost, but to fight he'd still try,
when suddenly Ashok was injured on his thigh!
An enemy sword had made a lash
leaving a nasty bleeding gash!
He fell into the courtyard, where he could barely stand –
but even so he kept fighting, with a sword in his hand.

It looked like the prince was about to poorly fare,
but our nameless hero leapt up into the air,
flew over the wall and landed in the courtyard,
right beside the prince, who was being pressed hard;
Our marvellous hero then beat the soldiers back,
and while doing this amazing counterattack
the traveller cried to Ashok, "Do not give up hope!"
And with that our traveller found some rope,
and tied the wounded Prince of Allepay to his back
and carried him as if he were a lightly loaded pack!
The two so tied carried on the fight –
The two against a whole army's might.

But though they were surrounded
yet Trivanrum was confounded
for they could not defeat the two,
so great was their daring-do!
The Trivanrum soldiers were at the end of their wits,
when a voice was heard – it sounded much like Ranjit's!
One could hear the servant calling clearly, "This way! This way!" –
and soon came galloping the cavalry of Allepay!

The traveller's horse (with Ranjit clinging)
burst through, enemy soldiers flinging;
Followed close behind by soldiers, Allepay's best –
the royal guard, ready to do their Rajah's behest!
These elite soldiers of the court
completely surrounded the fort
trapping those soldiers who were inside,
while the rest, as if swept by the tide,
retreated from this onslaught of Allepay –
exhausted from battle, some broke and ran away!

Those soldiers fighting our hero and Ashok were trapped –
as the horsemen surrounded them, their will to fight was sapped.
They surrendered, and so our two heroes were saved –
after three days of battle, the heroes were not staved¹⁹!

Shirinar ordered her fleeing army with a shout,
preventing their retreat from being an utter rout;
When suddenly another army came from behind!
Shirinar turned to look, and this is what she did find :
The banners of Lord Falcon fluttering in the air,
and Prince Araneet, boldly in the van he did fare;
and the wise old Ezzadane, wizard of the Borderland,
giving orders to this new army with waves of his hand.

¹⁹ Staved – broken, crushed

Faced with this new threat Shirinar's army gave up the fight,
and surrendered their weapons to Prince Araneet's might.

Shirinar was upset, her mind was full of rage;
Her face looked fierce, like a lioness in a cage.
She then cried, "Although now you force me to retreat,
yet I will make all of you pay now for my defeat!"
And with the last of her magical will
she summoned a great flaming ball of ill
that suddenly did fly downwards from the sky!
"I don't care if you are from Trivanrum or Allepay,"
Shirinar cried, "You scum are all going to die today!"
Like a witch she then flew into the air,
and fled - towards Trivanrum she did fare.

The blazing ball she left behind crackled with sound,
and then starting falling faster towards the ground.
"What is that thing?" cried out Prince Araneet,
"What dire fate are we all about to meet?"

"It is going to explode!"
cried Ezzadane as he rode.
"It's going to destroy us all
if it's allowed further to fall!"
The wizard, his arms unfolding,
attempted then a spell of holding;
But all he could do was make the bomb fall slower –
despite all his will, it came closer and closer.
I am hoping that it is not too much to suppose
that you remember of that river that Shirinar froze?
Well, despite the jungle heat, the Gangin was frozen still –
our hero sauntered over and summoned up his will;
then with great magic strength, he lifted the whole block of ice!
Then he tossed that huge block as if it were a pair of dice!
The frozen river flew straight into the core
of the frightening blaze of that meteor.

A sudden explosion! A sudden thunder clap!
Where that fireball was, was now a misty gap;
Which coalesced into a brooding cloud
which quickly the sky did overshadow.
Then gentle flakes of white softly through the air did flow;
and so for the first time, the jungle had some snow!
It was cold, it was chilly, but everyone cheered,
for a horrid disaster from its course had been steered.

Araneet was eager for our hero to meet;
he rode through the ranks on his trusty horse so fleet.
(To show that he did not come looking for a fight,
he rode under a banner of purest white.)

The hero was helping Ashok his wound to attend,
with an improvised bandage the wound he did mend.
Araneet came and said, "Let me now forget my station,
and here bow down before you in high admiration!
When Lord Falcon heard of the invasion of Allepay,
he quickly sent me with his bold army down this way;
he made the decision fast, he was not at all perplexed,
for he knew that after this war, the Borderlands were next!
But I never thought I would see
two heroes fighting an army;
holding Shirinar's evil plans at bay
and thus, for all of us, saving the day!"

Then up from the rear,
royalty came near;
The very Rajah Krishnood came forth, and said,
"My son! Forgive me! How I feared you would be dead!"

"My lord and father, why do you lament?
The gods victory unto us have sent!
My Rajah, listen, I would have you know,

that this man beside me is a true hero.
He came here when the hope was dark and dim –
The fate of our nation looked quite grim,
But his mighty hand
has saved our land!
My high admiration I will not hide:
It was an honour to fight by his side!
I saw him alone face the mighty well-armed horde
that made up the army of that foreign lord,
that villain king who found it so easy to betray us –
But he did not reckon to meeting this hero thus!
My Rajah, my lord, my father,
treat this man as my brother!
Though I know not his name
for he wishes no fame –
My father, though you are a king, give the respect that's due
For this is a man like no other, a hero like few!"

The rajah ordered his son to be taken straight away
to the best doctors to be found back in Allepay.
Then to the hero spoke, "Your actions most exemplary,
shall most certainly become quite legendary!
I am the Rajah Krishnood, tell me your name,
then I may myself proclaim to the world your fame!"

The hero answered, "I mean no disgrace to your throne
but I must keep my name secret, for reasons of my own."
This answer angered the Rajah Krishnood
(who was always so volatile of mood) –
The rajah cried, "Such insolence! Such impertinence!
And he carries such a smug smile on his countenance!
Guards! Arrest this man! Arrest this arrogant whelp!
Put him in my dungeon, far away from help!"

The traveller's horse was angry, and was ready to fight,
but our nameless hero laughed, and calmed down his steed's might;

He allowed his horse and himself to be taken away
as captives to be kept in the dungeons of Allepay.
Although Araneet cried out
and the soldiers gave a shout –
all sorts of protestations would not change the rajah's mind;
he turned with a huff, and left those protests all behind.

But now before we get carried along too far,
let us find out what happened to Shirinar;
As well let us see
how fares Dundee;
And I think you would like to also have in your ken
the fate of Sanvajay's daughter, poor Princess Aren.

Shrieking through the night air,
with fierce eyes and tussled hair,
Shirinar flew until she had finally come
to the royal grand palace at Trivanrum.
Straight away she ran to fetch the book of Eibon,
and she turned to the page where it was scrawled upon:
How to summon the demon, by paying a price;
Life for a life – Eibon demands human sacrifice!

Then she raced to the room where Dundee was supposed to keep
the Princess Aren in a state of drugged stuporous sleep;
But when she rushed into Aren's room, she was not there!
In her bed was nothing but the emptiness of air!
Shirinar then cried out in her despair, "What is this!?
Why now in my darkest hour do my plans go amiss?
I have worked too hard and too long, and too much have gained,
for me now to relinquish all that I have attained!
I will triumph! I will not lose! I will not fly!
Even if it means a demon I must summon try!
And now, on the cusp of my ultimate power –
Why could not a princess stay in her bower!?"

“Forgive me master,” from out the shadows came a voice,
“but you saddled me with a far too terrible choice.
It did not seem right for drugs against Princess Aren to wield;
Should we not meet our foes on an even battlefield?”

“I should have known, you silly soft-hearted fool,
that you would never bend fully under my rule.
You have so much potential, you are so keen to learn;
You worked so diligently for my respect to earn.
One day you shall be more powerful than me –
You’re a fierce vampiric warrior mage to be.

“What would you have me do, Dundee?
Would you have us turn tail and flee?
And where would we run to, where would be our exile stern;
Where shall be our place, where shall we plot our return?
It’s easy for you, for ahead of you is so much time;
but in terms of power, I am edging past my prime.
After living in such luxuriousness,
do you expect me to live in the wilderness?
Do you expect me to return in shame to Orenai,
to once more ingratiate myself to Mordecai?
To once more have to believe his idealistic plan,
and his ridiculous dreams of a ‘Brotherhood of Man’?
Never, Dundee! I have fallen in love with my life,
I’m not about to let go of my dreams without a strife!”

And then, like an eagle swooping into a fox’s den,
from behind a hidden place, came the Princess Aren!
She said, “At Dundee’s pleading, though you are a foe,
I was going to give you a chance to leave and go.
But clearly you are not willing to listen to reason,
and thus I must destroy you for all of your treason!”

“Treacherous Dundee,
what have you done to me?

You knew that I to a furious battle went,
and now I have returned, all weary and spent!
Aren! I suppose that you now think that you have won?
Watch then! I shall sacrifice *myself* to demon Eibon!”

And then Shirinar with a wild eyed look,
opened up the pages of the dreaded book,
and then began some terrible words to intone
in a voice that quickly changed to a horrid moan.
Dundee and Aren rushed forth to snatch the book away,
but a demonic aura had come into play:
Shirinar was surrounded by a magical field
which acted as a dark impenetrable shield.
Dundee and Aren could only stand and watch helplessly
as demonic power consumed the witch relentlessly.
The book of Eibon crumbled and vanished into the air;
And from the sky came a howl mixed with terror and despair.
Shirinar’s body writhed, twisted and contorted –
her features became demonically distorted –
and she cried, “Dundee!
Save me! Eibon - it is eating me!”

Dundee against that demonic shield threw blow after blow,
but it was no use, and he could not save her from her woe.
Shirinar gave out a last blood curdling tormented scream,
then her body transformed as in a nightmarish dream.
Like the fall of a cocoon, the aura disappeared:
What were Shirinar’s eyes now at Dundee and Aren leered;
Two hideous wings unfurled, dripping and bloody;
And six new arms had sprouted from its body;
What was now Eibon had skin covered with scales;
Eibon’s stomach tore open, dropping entrails.

“Dundee!” cried Aren, “Your foolish teacher is dead!
What’s left of her body is now a demon instead!
But Eibon is still disorientated and weak –

we must destroy the demon while he is still meek!
Dundee, before this becomes our darkest hour,
lend to me now some of your fighting power!"

While Eibon lurched and stumbled floppily,
Dundee channelled his magical energy,
by putting his hand on Princess Aren's back
while she powered up for a mighty attack.

About Aren the air coloured with blue wisps of wind;
She cried, "*Har Har Mahadev, Sat Sri Aka, Jai Hind!*"
And, upon her own and Dundee's magic force drawing,
upon those words she sent a stream of power flowing!
It flew across the room, strong and fast,
and hit Eibon with a bellowing blast.

Eibon screamed, the demonic presence faded;
the demon's spirit back into limbo waded;
As the demon back home began to wind
Shirinar's naked body it left behind.

Dundee bent by Shirinar's body, lifeless on the ground;
It was as if nothing had happened, there was no sound.
The starry night was suddenly still and calm
as if the world had not come near any harm.
Shirinar's corpse was then picked up by Dundee L'Aster.
He turned and said. "Goodbye. I go to bury my master."
Before Aren could reply Dundee had taken flight,
using his magic will, he flew till he was out of sight.

So much for the witch Shirinar;
Her plans didn't take her very far.
Let's return now to our nameless hero –
I'm sure of his fate you are eager to know!
Ashok took it as an act of derision,
when he found his comrade was placed in prison.

He ignored his doctors and hobbled out of bed,
he went straight to his father and this is what he said,
“You have thrown the very man who saved the nation,
the man who allowed you to keep your royal station,
into a prison
as if in derision.

When there was help from no other
this man stood by me as a brother.
In what way can you call this fair?
If you still wish me for an heir,
then release him, or upon this honour mine,
I shall declare that I am no son of thine!”

Rajah Krishnood pondered upon the error of his way,
and admitted wronging the saviour of Allepay;
but before he could order the release of the hero,
in rushed a guard who cried, “My Rajah! You should know,
That the captive has escaped from the dungeon keep,
after somehow putting all our guards to sleep,
with some sort of magical song;
then to add insult to the wrong
he broke into the stables and took his horse!
Give the order, that we may chase him on his course!”

The Rajah answered, “No, captain, you may let him go.
After all, we had no right to treat him as our foe.”

Prince Ashok ran to the palace’s highest tower
so that he could with his eyes the city streets scour.
And there amidst the alleys he saw a man dressed in black,
riding a brave steed, sword by his side, ready for attack!
And Ashok cried, “Hero! I never got the chance to say
thank you for all you have done at that fight at Mandalay!
I hope you know that wherever leads your winding way,
that you have a brother in me back in Allepay!”
And it seemed to Ashok that the hero heard that,

for in the distance our hero waved his hat!
Then the nameless one, with a bearing noble and proud,
disappeared into the midst of a thronging crowd.

This then was the tale of how our hero saved the day,
by facing down an army at that fort of Mandalay;
A feat that could have been done by no one other,
except for our brave nameless traveller!
But of this hero, so good and so bold,
yet more wondrous tales to me have been told.
I have gathered these stories from far and from near,
and now soon I'll tell you one of those that reached my ear...

To be continued in the Empire of Shan...

A note from the author:

I'm really proud, by having written this ebook, to be part of a tradition of epic rhyme narratives in the English language, that includes Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales' and Edmund Spenser's 'The Faerie Queen'. But please browse my other ebooks at tomekpiorkowski.com

If you have posted a review of this ebook, please let me know! You can email me at tomek.piorkowski@gmail.com

And now back to the story...

The Ballad of the Traveller in the Empire of Shan

Once, in the far off forests of an eastern place,
there roamed those wilds members of the werewolf race.
To the south of them was the great and rich nation of Shan
into which they from now and then an invasion would plan –
for the Shan had silk and gold and tools and things,

those goods that sedentary settlement brings,
that nomads like the wolves were not used to making –
so the werewolves went south, were those things were for taking!

Tribute they demanded and tribute they extracted;
with prizes they went home after their force was enacted.
But a new Son of Heaven became Emperor of Shan
and his dream was to make northern wolf fear southern man :
The greatest army ever sent by a settled nation
went to put the werewolves back into their proper station.

It was a not a war that was easy for either side –
the fighting was brutal, and many good warriors died.
In this war there was much misery in its story;
so of this war let me not spin epic tales of glory.
Let it suffice to say
it could have gone either way
but that in the end the Shan were badly defeated,
and what was left of them back southwards retreated.
However, the fierce werewolves followed their track –
for the werewolves had resolved to counterattack!

Not long afterwards at the siege of Peiping,
defeat to the emperor the werewolves did bring;
and there was nothing the Shan could do to deter
the victory that was grasped by werewolf King Fenrir.
The Emperor then ended his life with his own blade –
his abandoned generals then surrender pacts made,
and each gave up his sword
to the conquering lord.

Then Fenrir's fiercest general, Lobo,
had this to say of what do with the foe:
"My King, do you wish to see even more
of these man monkeys grovelling on the floor?
They invaded our lands, and insulted our pride –

let us wipe out their entire nation in genocide!
And when the last human head
rolls on land scoured and dead,
then we can return back to our wandering ways,
as nomads in the forest, as in the olden days.”

But King Fenrir could not be swayed
to have such a decision made;
with a growl
and a scowl
this is what the great werewolf king Fenrir then said,
“If you dare touch even a hair on a human head,
I shall make an end of your life;
for I declare an end to this strife.
The war is over, now I shall be king of wolves and men,
and I shall rule from the Shan palace – it shall be my den.”

King Fenrir ruled with a wise and restrained hand,
and peace of a sort settled upon the land.
The humans had to accept that the werewolf race
would now rule over them, at least for a space.

But after a while trouble began to brew,
and Mai Doon, the governor-prince of Shang Fu,
was encouraged to rebel;
So his advisors would tell:
“You who carry the famous Rune Sword,
handed down from Shang Fu Lord to Lord,
how much longer shall we live under a foreign horde?
For how long shall your courage be locked away and stored?
Rise up and lead us and let us rebel!
We shall show the wolves the meaning of hell!”

King Fenrir was in bed, old and ill;
He sent his daughter to work his will.

Sigrimew²⁰ her father's rule would enforce
against Mai Doon's rebellious course.

When in human form, her ears were white, furry and long;
Her hair was snowy white, her body lithe and strong;
She was reckoned by both werewolves and men
as the most beautiful woman in their ken.
But her heart was fierce and her voice was commanding –
those under her would not dare an argument starting.
So it was she led her army, vowing to make them rue –
those who dared to turn rebel the province of Shang Fu!

But, would you believe, this war had barely begun to start
when the first to fall in this war was in fact: Mai Doon's heart;
For no sooner did he see his opponent's face,
then his mind and soul all tumbled out of place.
Of war and revolt he no longer could care,
entranced as he was by a beauty so fair.
Before the start of a single battle melee,
already Mai Doon had surrendered, upon his knee;
And his army dissolved in dismay,
as their leader was taken away.

Sigrimew, amused, locked away her foe,
in a cell that was below her window.
Mai Doon, undeterred at this fate,
sang poetry through the dungeon grate.
He sang odes from the Shan book of songs;
He sang of lover's rights and lover's wrongs;
He sang of flowers blooming under a springtime noon;
He sang of sorrows, of a lover lost in a lagoon;
Of nighttime trysts under a faithful moon;
Of useless rulers who could not leave too soon.
And by her window sat Sigrimew, the princess of Shan,

²⁰ Rhymes with 'morning dew'

every night listening to the songs of a confined man.

At last he was brought up to her room to sing,
escorted from his cell in the dungeon wing.
Every night he sang his songs, hoping her heart to win,
while gently playing melodies on an ancient guqin.²¹

Sigrimew listened with an attentive wolfish ear,
and every night their seats were put a little more near.
She grew more and more charmed at each and every word
that sank into her heart, and made her soul more stirred.
She drank him in with her eye, as he was lost in song;
To her, he could never into the night play too long.
But she grew irritable, for it seemed a conquered man
was conquering Sigrimew, the Wolf-Princess of Shan.

Then one night Sigrimew brought out Mai Doon's sword,
and toyed with it while listening to Shang Fu's lord;
when suddenly she leapt forward as he played,
and pressed against his neck his own naked blade.

"Your intentions," she said, "Are far too clear to miss;
If you will forfeit your life, I will grant you a kiss.
And if that is too much of a price for you to pay,
then forever in the dungeon I shall lock you away,
and never to your music, miserable and plain,
will I ever lend my condescending ear again!"

And then Mai Doon, with no fear in his eye,
to Sigrimew gave the following reply:
"Gladly I will take that kiss, for the mere price of my head;
For if I can never have you, I may as well be dead!"

He pulled her close; she hesitated as never before;

²¹ Guqin – a stringed instrument

She found herself dropping Mai Doon's sword upon the floor;
And I suppose from that we can the following infer:
She surrendered to the man who had surrendered to her.
So it was that Mai Doon became Sigrimew's mate;
Alas, it was the beginning of a star crossed fate.

King Fenrir felt his end coming near,
he spoke in his voice, brave and clear,
"With all good and great things in life have I been blest;
I am satisfied, and now go to my final rest."
These were the final words of King Fenrir,
ruler of wolves and men, hero, conqueror.

Then Sigrimew was crowned as Empress of Shan,
and Mai Doon was declared her consort and man.
But harsh whispers spread like fire
through spiteful hearts in the empire;
To some men, the traitor Mai Doon deserved a flog,
for being with someone they considered a dog.
And some wolves grumbled that they had to see
their queen mating with a clean shaven monkey.

Few were more upset than the fierce werewolf Lobo,
that general who was a terror to any foe.
He had always refused to shapeshift to human form,
always keeping his werewolf shape as the norm.
He looked in disgust at wolves, supposed to be his ilk,
that stuck to the human shape, and wore clothes of silk;
All because they were rulers now of a civilised land,
practising 'politics', speaking words as sleights-of-hand.
And Lobo would drink, fight and growl,
and miss the sound of the distant howl;
He would spit at the brick laid streets of Peiping
and miss the wind that through the forest trees would sing;
Poor he felt in the palace rooms, he felt keenly the lack:
Of the freedom of roaming, of the hunt with his pack.

Shang Fu was still hard to control, and rebel voices rose;
Once again they wanted the empire to oppose.
“Why should we in our land be treated like hogs?
Woe to the Shan if they would be ruled by dogs!”
And though most people were too busy to hear,
yet to some people those words to war would steer.

When Sigrimew heard of these reports, she called a counsel,
and asked if the army should all such dissent go quell.
Mai Doon spoke, “I am the governor of Shang Fu still.
It would hurt my soul to see my people done ill.
Let me go back and talk to them;
I’m sure that I this torrent can stem.”
And though she dearly would rather have had him stay,
the empress at last allowed Mai Doon to have his way.
Mai Doon then set off with an escort,
in order matters in Shang Fu to sort.

Lobo was disgusted, from vicious words he would not shirk,
“I can’t believe a man has gone to do a werewolf’s work.
King Fenrir must be heaving in his unrestful grave...
Why must I bow to a *man* as if *I* were the slave?
Our queen plays with monkeys... It grows hard to think.
I may as well drown myself in another drink.”

His comrade and lieutenant, Skoll, poured wine into his cup;
“Now, general, why do you whimper and snarl like a pup?
It is not like my old General Lobo,
to drown himself in sadness and sorrow.
Why sit here, seething in dissatisfaction,
when the chance is here to finally take action?
Let us capture this Mai Doon, then use him to bargain –
Sigrimew for her lover will be forced to give in!”

Lobo looked at Skoll with narrowed eye,

and then to Skoll gave this reply,
“You stink of fox’s blood, with your cunning;
Who knows what schemes are through your head running.
But I would rather stink like you
then let myself the passing days rue.
Tell my troops to secretly prepare to leave, let them learn –
we are going to have an ambush for Mai Doon’s return!”

Now on the fringes of the empire,
was a village going through something dire.
A mixed group of brigands was roaming the land,
taking whatever they could get into their hand;
Of both werewolves and men consisted this bandit gang,
in five provinces was their leader sentenced to hang:
Warg was his name, a werewolf so fearful,
that many referred to him as ‘the dreadful.’

The villagers of Jen Li
had been living contentedly
in what had been the peaceful province of Kuang Yu;
But with trouble brewing in neighbouring Shang Fu,
the army had been rallied away from the frontier
and now villains in their place began to appear!
It was with fear that the people of Jen Li learnt
some neighbouring villages had already been burnt.
To discuss any plans on how better than that to fare,
an emergency meeting was called in the village square.

Some said to run, some said to hide;
Some thought that maybe they could abide;
The village chief Lu scratched his balding head,
wondering what to do with all they said.
“If only the gods could help us,” he thought,
as the most wise path he clumsily sought.

It was his daughter, Li-en,

who first heard a whistle then;
A happy care free melody
that wafted rather merrily.
The ten year old ran through the crowd,
“What could that be?” she thought out loud.

Riding through the village on a horse that knew not slack,
was a handsome stranger armed with sword and dressed in black;
The horse’s eyes were red
and flashing with dread,
but the stranger’s face was kind and warm,
and had a beautiful and handsome form.

And for some reason, little Li-en then asked,
“Stranger, we in this village are sorely tasked.
We don’t know what to do,
so let me ask you:
A gang of bandits threatens to attack...
What should we do, stranger in black?”

“Little girl, to keep your village in safety,
then you must listen carefully to me.
There is a certain someone who yearns myself to find;
He is always chasing me, and is never far behind.
Tonight, just after the sun has set down
this individual shall pass through your town;
Do not dare go to bed, little one,
until the following task is done:
Tonight, when Dundee passes through,
grab him with both hands, hold him tight to you;
Beg and plead and entreat him to stay,
and he for your village shall win the day.”

Then the nameless one rode on,
and soon enough was gone;
He was not even noticed by the rest of the crowd,

so absorbed were they in their own babblings loud.
But little Li-en watched as he departed,
dearly holding onto the words he had imparted.

Meanwhile, after much diplomatic manoeuvring,
Mai Doon was to the capital returning.

Weak and weary was he of being alert like a hawk,
navigating the stormy skies of political talk.
He longed to return to his lover Sigrimew,
with thoughts that flecked his mind like the morning dew.
On the winding path he pushed himself and his train
through good and miserable weather, through sun and rain.
What mattered this world, with its fill of pleasure and pain?
All he cared for now was to see his Sigrimew again.

Skoll, always planning some sort of trickery,
used what he knew of magic wizardry,
and with his mystical eye,
he Mai Doon's path did scry.
And his general, Lobo, then laid down his plan –
his wolves then lay in wait, to ambush the man.

After a long day's travel, Mai Doon and his men made camp;
The cook prepared the meal, while one lighted every lamp;
Another one played the flute, while another would sing;
And the sergeant arranged guards in a defensive ring.
The Duke of Shang Fu sat amongst them, most unlike a lord,
laughing with them at their delights, while polishing his sword.
Surely they felt that this would be another peaceful night,
with little to bother them until the next morning bright.

But there was a wolf watching from the deepest shadows;
Silently he crept away, undetected by his foes.
This wolf returned to the General Lobo,
and growled in his ear all that he did know.

Lobo then snarled in the happiest way,
and cried, “Come werewolves! On to the fray!
Once more we go hunting for men,
that the soil may sing with blood again!”

Mai Doon was asleep, when he awoke to a howl –
he right away suspected that something had gone foul.
He unsheathed his rune sword, and stepping without slack,
ran out of his tent, into the midst of an attack!
His men were screaming, falling left and right;
Against werewolves were they suddenly in fight!

Mai Doon swept through the battle, hewing his way;
His magnificent rune sword came into play;
And it seemed that his sword would carry the day
as every wolf before him Mai Doon did slay!

Then came a howl, bellowing through the night,
so mighty and loud that it did halt the fight!
Swords and claws halted suddenly in mid air,
and towards that howl everyone did stare.
Enter Lobo, tall, strong, magnificent and proud,
with a presence that would hush the angriest crowd.
He walked slowly, fearsomely, towering above all,
with deliberate step, till his gaze on Mai Doon did fall.

“By all that I am!” Lobo cried “By all that I will!
Your disgusting monkey face urges me to kill!”

The lord shook his sword of the rune,
and thus to Lobo replied Mai Doon:
“Treasonous wretch! Do not in front of me mewl!
Let’s spare our men – fight me in a duel!
And when finally you beg me for mercy to show,
I’ll drag you back home on a leash, you bastard Lobo!”

Then General Lobo laughed with mirth,
“At least in courage you show some worth!
Very well, let this battle halt, I’ll face you one on one!
Prepare yourself, fool. I will wait until you are done.”

The two sides separated uneasily;
Wolf and man faced each other warily.
Mai Doon called for his servant to put on his armour,
and while it was strapped upon him he hardened his ardour.
When he stepped forward, his armour glinting in the torchlight,
he truly looked like a lord, like a magnificent knight.
But even Mai Doon felt small and looked on in awe,
at Lobo who stood tall, naked, armed only with claw!

But Mai Doon refused to feel afraid,
and forward he went, flashing his blade.
Down like a hammer would go Lobo’s fist,
which Mai Doon’s shield would stoutly resist.
In return the rune sword through the air was thrust,
which Lobo dodged or parried, but only just!
‘Twas in truth a magnificent fight
between two beings great in might.

The duel dragged on, with neither having advantage;
Till Mai Doon’s limbs wearied from this fight most savage.
Despite his soul’s commanding, his limits began to prove,
that legs can’t run forever and arms can struggle to move.
It felt like he could barely hold his shield in his hand,
it felt like he could barely order his legs to stand.
Though his spirit was brave, his body proved too weak,
and clearly his chances for victory were now bleak.
With dismay he saw that Lobo was not tired;
Blow after blow from his arms the werewolf afired.

Till finally came an instance, where Mai Doon then knew:

While he lived, he would never again see his Sigrimew.

A mighty strike was then thrown by the fearsome Lobo,
Mai Doon's legs buckled, and he sank beneath the blow.
The man tried with a sword swing to make a last stand,
but the werewolf batted his sword straight out of his hand!

Helpless and exhausted, Mai Doon's body trembled;
But his eyes were fierce and with courage assembled.
Though he had nothing now with which himself he could defend,
yet he refused to feel fear, merely for meeting his end.

Then Lobo, with a grin upon his jaws,
upon Mai Doon firmly set down his claws,
Saying, "How I yearned for you to be dead!
Now I am going to rip off your head!"

"My general!" cried Skoll, "What of our plan?
As hostage, remember the value of this man!"
And Skoll leapt forward, trying to intercede,
to prevent his general from doing the deed.
"Remember this man is a lever of power!
With it we can make the empire cower!
If we do things right, then all Shan's cities and towers,
all her wide lands and waters, shall all be ours!"

But Lobo struck Skoll, and Skoll did yelp.
"What do I care for all that, you whelp!
What do I care for this stink of a rotten empire,
which in any case I would throw in a judgement fire!
Why should I soil myself with such thoughts to think?
Why should a werewolf with political schemes stink?
Never mind the consequences, never mind my fate!
Why should I let my fury unwillingly abate?
Blow whatever wind, blow whatever wrack!
I shall die with my pride upon my back!"

Having said this, Lobo
then turned towards his foe.

And Mai Doon struck one last time with his bruised and weary fists,
which Lobo countered as easily as one walks through mists.
The werewolf caught the man in a hold; Mai Doon then did scream,
as Lobo with his great strength, as in a nightmarish dream,
stuck his claws in the man's eyes, and then pulled at Mai Doon's head,
till the man's neck started tearing, all bloody and red.
Lobo pulled till from the body the head he tore;
And so Mai Doon died, the ground covered with his gore.

Mai Doon's wounded battered men looked on in horror,
as before them unfolded this awful terror.
Lobo cast upon them his eye,
and said, "Now the rest of you shall die."

And the wolves fell forward, and the men tried their best;
But it was clear that the wolves were winning the contest.
And as they bravely fought against these odds,
some of them sent a prayer to the gods.

Lobo was watching the fray happily,
noting his imminent victory,
when he pricked his wolfish ears... Did he hear a song?
Suddenly a figure whirled through the battle throng!
The figure was dressed in black,
with a furious attack!
Wolf upon wolf backed away from his sword,
Lobo watched his troops slink away, overawed!
What a warrior! Mai Doon's men looked on in wonder,
as this amazing man fought like a blast of thunder!
And just like that, the men were saved,
as the wolves backwards were flayed!

And just then (but of course)

into the fray came the horse!
A furious fearless black-sheened mare
who fought as if without a care.
Her red eyes were fiercely flashing,
as hoof upon wolf down came crashing!

Skoll stepped forward, and he said angrily,
“I know not where you’re from or who you be,
but mere physical fighting skill does not scare me –
Let’s see if you can face me off magically!”
And Skoll summoned his will, some words he did exclaim,
and then his claws with a magic fire went aflame!
The magic flickered with an eerie yellow light,
sending menacing shapes dancing in the night!

Our nameless hero simply smiled at his foe;
He sheathed his magnificent sword and raised his fists –
With magic will, his hands he suffused with blue mists!
The blue mist wafted from his hands, dancing in the air,
as he took a martial stance (with just the right hint of flair!)

Skoll swallowed, suppressing his rising admiration
for this hero whose each move was an inspiration!
He said, “Clearly you are a worthy enemy –
Let’s see how you fare in a battle with me!”

And then these mighty warriors clashed fist on fist,
with Skoll’s yellow flames against our hero’s blue mist.
And indeed it was a sight to see the colours flashing constantly,
to watch the night light up with blue and yellow
as mists and flame clashed between foe and foe.
Though Skoll tried to tear our hero apart,
our hero fought back with perfect martial art;
And after twenty rounds of battle
Skoll was beginning to lose his mettle.
And then Skoll suddenly found himself thwarted in his aims –

the hero had grabbed his paws, and those mists then quenched his flames!

Werewolf Skoll leapt back, and stared at each now-magicless hand, wondering who could so easily magic flame withstand.
The hero, for special effect, flared his hands into blue –
Skoll knew to continue would be a decision to rue!
Skoll backed away, aware that he had lost the fight.
He bowed a little, to acknowledge the hero's might.

Lobo howled, and then himself leapt forward
(while yelling at Skoll for being a coward.)
Our glorious hero dispelled his mists
and reverted back to ordinary fists,
and once again there was a fantastic martial contest
as Lobo tried to prove once, for all, that *he* was the best!

Brute force met with manly strength
as the battle drew on in length.
The raging werewolf threw down blow after blow,
but was unable to overcome his foe!
The nameless traveller, with a smile, fought with ease –
his every move a display of great expertise!
Till at last it became time for him to end the fight
and he threw a right punch of most glorious might!
All who watched were quite impressed
as he hit Lobo square on the chest;
The force of the blow sent the wolf flying,
through the air backward he went, tumbling!

Coughing up blood through his wolfish nose,
Lobo on wobbly feet then arose
(A being of lesser strength would have died on the spot!)
as he tried to force his body to take a countershot.
There was no hint of surrender in Lobo's eye –
rather a rage that said 'either I kill or I die!'

But Skoll, who had his own secret plans to actualise,
was not about to let his pawn meet a sudden demise;
He quickly summoned his magical will for a spell –
And a red fog suddenly came, as if straight from hell!
As the fog faded, the wolves were all gone
(The men looked in wonder thereupon)!
Skoll had the wolves away from there all teleported
(and thus was Lobo's suicidal rage thwarted).

A strange silence was there suddenly in the moonlit night –
it was broken by the moans of those wounded in the fight,
and the tears of the captains, by the body of Mai Doon,
as they mourned the claw's defeat of the sword with the rune.

The hero walked among them, giving comfort where he could;
With his magic healing, even the weakest then up stood.
Dreadfully began the dawning twilight,
to put an end to that terrible night.
Mai Doon's men half-heartedly began to rally
for the capital was still some distance to sally.
They (naturally) allowed the hero to take the lead,
for of a leader they certainly now had a need.

They gathered the fallen Mai Doon's body and head,
and put it on a platform as a funeral bed;
And those four of the least wounded soldiers carried Mai Doon;
Upon their shoulders went the lord of the sword of the rune.

They marched towards the capital, our hero leading;
All the time the men listened for distant howls, fearing.
But our hero's amazing presence
was more than enough of a defence,
and no other dreadful event
upon their journey made torment.

Now, before my story runs away from me,
I should turn my story back to Jen Li.
That selfsame night that the Duke of Shang Fu met his end,
destiny a hero to our village did send.
Little Li-en snuck out from bed just after sunset,
and under the starry sky this is who she met:

He was wearing a tattered cloak of scarlet red,
he gently strode with a soft and silent tread;
His many adventures were etched on his face and bearing –
clearly he was a man who had learnt how to be daring!
He had experienced many cultures, and travelled far;
He studied under Merli, Orion and Shrinar,
and had spent time apprenticed to Mephisto the cat
(who'd enjoyed calling the vampire a glorified bat!)
Always mindful of his vengeful quest,
he pursued our hero without rest:
From Angleland where Dundee's father had died,
through Ital and Rumun and Slavia he hied,
then south he went, into Afrik, before sailing away,
across the warm ocean, to Trivanrum and Allepay.
Yet always just before him was our hero;
Somehow he just never met with his chosen foe –
for always some noble task would appear,
which off his chosen course his quest would veer.
Yet always, Dundee would return to his pursuit;
To keep chasing our hero he was resolute!
And no thought had he of stopping in Jen Li,
while pursuing the traveller so ardently.

Li-en ran and clutched at his cloak with her hands,
and to him who had travelled through so many lands,
this is what she then said,
“I fear we shall soon be dead.
Fearsome bandits stalk the country –
we the next victims shall surely be!

What can we farmers do if they invade?
I beg of you, stranger, lend us your aid!"

Dundee wanted to say no,
and through the village to go;
To continue on his vengeful quest
that spurred him on and on without rest.
But there was something in little Li-en's eye,
something in her soul that there did underlie:
An earnestness, a purity,
which spoke to him in affinity.

The door to Chief Lu's village home slowly creaked open,
and Lu's attention suddenly became awoken,
by Dundee's silhouette in the doorway,
dressed in glorious tattered scarlet array,
little Li-en holding the vampire's hand,
with a trust that only a child could understand...

This village was now protected by the hand of fate;
on this I think there is little need to further narrate.
Back then let's turn to the nameless traveller,
our charming hero and fearsome battler,
who led Mai Doon's shattered troop,
and brought home the ill fated group.

It was nightfall when they reached their destination:
Peiping, glorious capital of the Shan nation.
In the palace court under the stars and the moon's light,
they placed the body of he who had fallen in the fight;
They laid him down before the Empress Sigremew –
before she was told anything, she already knew.
She gently uncovered the body that lay dead,
and stone-faced lifted up Mai Doon's severed head.
She tenderly cradled the head in her arms,
as if to protect it from all the world's harms;

And carried it to the Shan throne,
all the while her face like stone.

She sat on the throne, everyone looking on in awe;
The wolves understood, though the men knew not what they saw.
The empress sat on the throne with a dead man's head;
Only a single tear crossed her expression like lead.

And then she howled, she howled, she howled, she howled like a loon;
She howled so that her howling could reach the very moon;
She howled for the master of the sword of the rune;
She howled for a lost lover, her lost lover, Mai Doon.

And each werewolf felt her howls go into the heart,
and then the palace wolves also began to take part;
And as their mournful song echoed into Peiping,
the wolves in the city also the dirge began to sing.
And so the capital, bathed in the moon's light,
was filled with sad howling throughout that night.

Sigrimew then called for Mai Doon's sword;
She held up the blade of Shang Fu's Lord,
and she in pain cried out, "I... swear... revenge!" –
her soul burning for her lover to avenge.

And she began to seek Lobo henceforth,
but he and Skoll had long since fled north,
where Lobo with the wolf tribes did liaise,
thereby hoping his own army to raise.

"As if it were my fault," said Lobo,
"That I should now be the wolf queen's foe.
Who forced her to take a human mate?
Why should I have to suffer this fate –
that I might live with my eyes to see
mongrels to be born half-wolf, half-monkey!
I'd rather die than live to see such aberration!

Well cursed be the day we wolves spared the Shan nation!"
And about him he gathered a ragtag force,
whereby he hoped to change history's course.

News of his rebellious gathering
reached Sigrimew's palace in Peiping;
And the imperial army marched out,
Sigrimew hoping Lobo to rout.
Both werewolves and men composed her army;
She led it herself, her eyes all fiery.
Our hero had impressed her, and he rode along,
and during the march, he comforted her with song;
For there were times when her broken heart
threatened to tear all her aims apart.
And the provincial forces were summoned too –
from the whole empire soldiers she drew.
And as soldiers left the province of Kuan Yu,
Warg, who was hiding there, decided this to do:

"Why should we bandits to the law conform,
when our foes are marching into the storm?
When war does the law distract,
that is the time for us to act!
Let us go forth, and what we want we shall take!
Let terror and fear in the countryside awake!"
And after some discussion, it was Jen Li
that they decided their next target would be!

Warg's gang was of both wolves and men composed,
a more ragtag bunch could never be proposed:
Scallywags, outlaws, ruffians, killers, rapists...
Their tools were swords and claws and sometimes blunted fists.
Completely lacking in nobility,
selfishness their only ability,
they roamed the lands in a predatory manner,
a rogue bandit force, under werewolf Warg's banner.

Dundee had managed to convince the village
that the best way to defend themselves from pillage
would be into a large nearby cave to retreat,
for if he the enemy during the day must meet,
then as a vampire he would want to avoid the sun!
Better, he reckoned, that the fight in a dark cave be done...

But back to Warg and his gang –
armed with sword, claw, knife and fang –
they descended on Jen Li in the middle of the night,
hoping thereby to pillage and rape with hardly a fight...
They rushed in as a disorganised group,
a motley brutal bandit troop.

But empty of people was the village!
Hardly anything was there to pillage!
Warg and his crew were bewildered –
such an oddity they had not considered!

And then from behind an empty homestead,
came into the torchlight a figure in red;
Dundee stepped forth with a heroic stride,
his bearing full of courage and goodly pride.
Under the starry sky, one could see the vampire
to great and noble things this night would aspire!

An angry glance Warg then threw,
and he said, “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is Dundee L’Aster, a vampire mage;
And I ask you kindly to take elsewhere your rampage.”

And Warg’s men laughed out loudly in abject derision,
and Warg replied, “Before I make such a decision,
allow me to clear up your confusion,

for you seem to be under a delusion.

I am Warg, werewolf king of robbery;

‘The Dreadful’ I am called in my infamy.

I have killed and thieved throughout the empire;

I laugh at laws and put villages to fire.

I roam the lands and freely trod people under,

it is my pleasure to watch other people suffer.

And I have fought many a fool who thought he was strong;

And always in the end, I have proved that the fool was wrong!

In all things, I have always considered myself first:

All beings exist merely to serve my hunger and thirst.

Now I tell you to bend down on your knee,

and beg me to spare your life mercifully,

for I as a wolf will not be scared of a bat!

What are you, if nothing but a filthy winged rat!?

Your pathetic race is long past its time –

long lost is the werebat form of your prime.

You wretch, show me now that you know your place,

and I may refrain from ripping off your face!”

Dundee replied, “Werewolf, I fear nothing will assuage;

I asked you kindly, and you in return threats would wage.

You are clearly not the type to negotiate,

so I don’t see why we should prattle and prate.

Clearly you only wish to show your might,

so I would suggest that you shut up and fight!”

Warg, who had never been much into reflection,

to Dundee’s challenge did not raise an objection.

Without even a slight moment’s pause

he leapt forward, baring his teeth and claws.

Dundee had long ago forgotten how to be afraid –

calmly to the side he the clumsy attack did evade,

and then with the wolf he did grapple

(for which his strength was just about ample).

They wrestled each other furiously, round after round,
neither strong enough to throw the other onto the ground –
though nature's fury into Warg's body was fed,
Dundee countered with the dread strength of the undead.
Their mad grappling grew ever more and more fierce,
each was unable the other's defence to pierce.
They threw each other into the walls of buildings,
causing all sorts of random demolishings.
Yet even with houses collapsing about them,
neither fighter would his fighting spirit stem.
Warg's gang watched in awe and in fear,
and stepped backwards when the match drew near!

But Warg was a supernatural brute, not a mage;
Foolish he was a fight against Dundee to wage!
For Dundee could always call on his magic will,
to pull through the worst of thin and thick and ill!
Finally Dundee decided that it was time to win,
and then he the helpless werewolf to the ground did pin!

"I would take your life," cried Dundee with enraged voice,
"But I was taught never in anger to make a choice.
Now get your men out of here, before I am moved to harm!
I won't kill you, but I may be tempted to break your arm!
And furthermore, I kindly request, my sire,
that you from further banditry do retire,
and trouble neither this nor any other village,
and not take the fruits of other peoples tillage."

And Warg, who was exhausted and in pain,
acceded to all that, and did not complain;
And he left shuffling, his gang in train;
And he swore never to steal again!

As nearer they came back to their hideout,
members of Warg's gang began to voice their doubt :

“Are we really going to end our ways?
Will we have to work the rest of our days?
Are we going to put away our claws and knives?
Shall we settle down, farm the land, have kids, get some wives?”

And Warg howled, “Like hell we do!
As soon as I my strength renew,
we shall burn to a cinder this village Jen Li,
and I will have my revenge on that bat Dundee!”

Now back my tale must turn to our hero,
the nameless one with Sigrimew hunted her foe.
And fierce with wrath grew General Lobo,
and hiding from her he would no longer go.
Skoll tried to dissuade him,
saying the chances were grim:
that they were still too outnumbered
and that the war could be blundered.
Skoll suggested to first seed lies deceitfully,
to try and split Sigrimew’s force with treachery.
But Lobo would not listen to such ‘fox’s talk,’
preferring ‘the mad plunge to the silent stalk’;
Skoll, weary, began planning on how Lobo to kill –
but yet Skoll needed him for his charismatic will;
For Skoll was disliked even by those he richly hired,
while Lobo was by many wolves freely admired;
And the werewolf army they had so painfully built,
would without Lobo back to the forests go wilt.

And so Lobo sent a message, in words cold and stiff,
“My Queen, I challenge you to battle at Red Cliff!”

Sigrimew’s six generals urged the empress to say no,
for never should the choice of warfield be left to the foe.
But Sigrimew’s rage became hot and eager,
and she would not wait to begin to beleague;

Thus the challenge she rashly accepted –
victory at Red Cliff would be attempted!

Zhang Fay, Guan Yung²², Zhao Yoon, Caleb, Cortard and Hemming:
These were Sigrimew's generals, clever in warplanning.
The last three were wolves, the first three men of Shan;
All were faithful and loyal, each wolf and man.
Though they disagreed with the battlefield,
yet not less fury would they in battle wield!

And Lobo too, had leaders of worth –
of courage these wolves did not have dearth!
His lieutenant, Skoll, though disliked by many,
could wage as furious a fight as any;
And to that he had mastery of arcane art,
that in the coming battle would play a part.
To Lobo's banner had come quick
a clan lead by a chief called Ulrik;
Young Ulrik's father's life was saved by Lobo,
in battles with the Shan, that now seemed long ago;
Ulrik was now the chieftain of his clan,
to repay Lobo's acts was always his plan:
Ulrik and his clan's hearts were now set
to repay for Lobo their chieftain's debt.
And then there was Randulf,
a most charismatic wolf,
who with his laughter and energy,
was for battle always ready;
And he gathered those who for adventure yearned,
a hardy band of werewolves who comfort spurned!

Many others of lesser note flocked to Lobo's banner;
A small army the general built up in this manner.
But many more in the north ignored his call,

²² Guan Yung – rhymes with 'rung'

and this was for Lobo the worst of all;
For they said, "Sigrimew is our rightful queen;
That peace should reign old King Fenrir's will had been.
You're a war hero, for that reason we won't intervene,
but though we won't hinder, neither to treason we'll lean."
Yet though these words cut into proud Lobo's heart,
yet he was the type to finish what he did start.
And so to Red Cliff he brought his little force
against the odds to fight his chosen course!

Red Cliff towered over a treeless plain;
It was the old edge of the werewolf domain.
At its foot the two armies did gather
on a morn with clear sunny weather.

Sigrimew kept the cliff face on her right,
as her soldiers gathered in all their might.
She led the centre, along with Zhao Yoon and Hemming;
Cortard was the general who the right was leading;
On the left were mounted men, under Guan Yung and Zhang Fay –
eager were these knights of Shan to ride into the fray.
And Caleb had been sent with the archers to climb the cliff,
so that with arrows from that height they could wreak some mischief.
Our nameless traveller with Caleb asked to go,
and Sigrimew for his request permission did bestow.

Opposite them gathered Lobo's rebellion,
with the cliff to his left his force he did station.
Lobo took the centre; to his left was young Ulrik;
On his right Randulf, ready to plunge into fighting thick!

Hemming, scanning the lines with his vision keen,
mentioned, "I note that Skoll is nowhere to be seen...
I hope that he has fled our battle scene,
for to fight magic I am never keen."

“Never mind the knave!” roared Sigrimew,
“Let’s make these bastards this day rue!
Signal Caleb to let his arrows loose,
that I may laugh as the foes reduce!”

And Zhao Yoon ordered a trumpet blast,
echoing up the cliff the sound was cast;
And along the crimson cliff edge sheer,
the imperial archers did appear.
And Caleb howled down into the plain,
“Rebels, now enjoy the feel of my rain!”

Then a cloud of arrows
was fired towards the foes.
And it was Ulrik’s clan, to the cliff nearest,
which with arrow wounds paid the price dearest.
Lobo, seeing his allies fall,
did up to the sky howling call,
“Skoll! Stop them! Now is your time!
Let not more pups die in their prime!”
For many in Ulrik’s clan were young,
for the first time into battle flung.

Then the ground under Caleb’s feet rumbled,
and some of his men over the cliff tumbled!
General Caleb cried “From where comes this shaking?
It will not be long before this cliff goes down quaking!”

The nameless traveler appeared beside him,
saying, “General, the outlook appears grim.
This cliff is about to collapse, without a doubt;
It is best for now a retreat to call out.
While they flee, I will seek out the mage,
that thus against us magic would wage.”

“I whole-heartedly agree, nameless one, with your surmise,”

and Caleb sounded the retreat, fearing a capsize;
While the hero darted about the cliff's plateau,
seeking out where, in which shadow, hid his foe.

Skoll was not the type to eagerly hide,
and out from behind a rock he did stride,
"I'm no coward, that so eagerly you must seek!
But first allow me despair upon you to wreak!"
And he placed his claws upon the ground
and the earth shook with a horrible sound
and down came the cliffside crashing,
into Sigrimew's troops smashing!

The cliff rocks rained down thick and hard
upon the right wing, led by Cortard.
Some of Caleb's men, tardy in retreat,
also fell, their sad demise to meet.
And beneath the debris that did tumble,
wolves and men died buried by rubble!
And confusion seemed down the ranks to spread –
this falling cliff seemed to fill some hearts with dread!

Lobo, sensing the change, pushed his centre forward;
He led the charge, crying, "Strike at them! Onward!"
And though her right was in chaos, Sigrimew cried,
"Stand ready, for here comes the enemy tide!"

Like a wave the rebels into her army crashed,
and swords and claws then heroically clashed;
But above on the cliff, Caleb did roar,
"Skoll, you wretch! Let your tricks be no more!
Cortard below was my dearest friend,
and now perhaps he has met his end...
Though I have no magic, I'll fight you still!
For the sake of my friend, you I'll gladly kill!"

And before our nameless hero could intervene
Caleb had lunged at Skoll, claws open, battle-keen.
And while the madness of war raged below,
Caleb engaged for three rounds his foe.
But though in battle skill Caleb had mastery,
what good was this against arcane artistry?
Skoll tired of the physical fight,
and calling upon his inner might,
he grabbed Caleb tightly, and magic words he exclaimed;
Into him surged his power, and Caleb burst aflame!
And while Caleb screamed, Skoll pushed him in the midriff;
Caleb then flailing fell off the edge of the cliff!
And so the general fell into Skoll's web;
Thus was the demise of brave wolf Caleb.

Despite poor Caleb's fears, Cortard in fact did survive,
desperately rallying his men who were still alive;
For now Ulrik and his clan,
as per the battle plan,
were surging against Sigrimew's right;
If Cortard's men there lost the fight
then Ulrik, outflanking Sigrimew, would bear down his might
and straight through Sigrimew's centre his forces would smite!

Guan Yung and Zhang Fay,
seeing how went the fray,
wished in turn to outflank Lobo's centre –
except that Randulf played the interceptor,
and then bravely did Randulf's band
against the Shan cavalry stand.

And furiously flushed red the face of Zhang Fay,
and he cried, "You stinking wolf! Get out of my way!"

And Randulf laughed, then the werewolf cried,
"If hot talk is all you have, stand aside!"

Zhang Fay could not control his rising rage,
and hastily the werewolf he did engage.
Randulf in his strong werewolf form knocked down Zhang Fay's horse,
Zhang Fay jumped off as if this was a matter-of-course,
and swinging his spear
as he drew more near,
he shouted his challenge to Randulf,
to engage in combat twixt man and wolf.

Randulf and Zhang Fay for five rounds viciously fought,
each eagerly victory over the other sought.
But Randulf kept calm in his red-maned head,
while Zhang Fay followed his fury instead;
And as tends to happen, if one can keep cool,
then your opponent will prove to be a fool –
Zhang Fay was suddenly disarmed
and would have been greatly harmed
had he not been rescued by Guan Yung
when his fate in the balance hung!
Guan Yung plucked him from defeat
and upon his horse beat a retreat.

Thus was waging the brutal battle below,
but above, our hero faced Skoll as a foe.
The nameless one spoke thus to the werewolf Skoll,
“I imagine that the great power you control,
could only have been awoken in the Orenai,
under apprenticeship to the witch-king, Mordecai.
But I suspect from your actions and your manner,
that you are no longer strictly under his banner?”

To which Skoll quietly replied,
“Indeed it is as you described.
But I for my ambition had to flee into exile,
and I have not spoken to the king in a long while.

If only he was less a hero and more a man,
he could perhaps have dealt in a lesser master plan.
How can I believe in his grand schemes?
Each crazy idea that from his heart beams?
He believes that peace can come from force,
that he alone can change the world's course...
Perhaps the witch-king may achieve his lofty aims,
if the demon-god does not consume the world in flames!
But if I ever manage to rule the Shan empire,
I will march into Orenai and put it to fire!
And perhaps then, in my own way,
I shall be hero and save the day,
and save the whole world from its doom
that may come with the rise of Uzoom.
But you... I think I understand your game.
Is your death not tied in with your name?
You are marvellously great, but greater you could be;
But tragedy I sense is part of your destiny.
Why do you accept your fate?
Do you wish the gods to placate?
Why don't you join me in my ambitious quest?
Together we can crush Mordecai in contest!"

To which our brave hero replied,
"Skoll, if my fate to yours was tied,
the Shan empire would never be yours,
it would merely be devoured by wars.
And, unchallenged, the Witch-king Mordecai
would go on with his plans in the Orenai.
Rather, it is you who I ask to join me;
Else your acts will only bring misery."

To which Skoll angrily said,
"I would rather be dead.
Although you think I am but full of vices,
I feel that I've made too many sacrifices;

I will not keep my ambition down,
for I deserve upon my head: a crown!
Since it seems you wish to stand against me,
let us settle this dispute now, properly.
Unlike the last time, you will find me more prepared;
Let us fight, and let neither let the other be spared!"

So two warriors, both strong in magic will,
did battle then, with all their amazing skill.
So strong was their magic that they flew into the sky,
and fought their battle as at each other they did fly.
Lightning flashed, though there was nary a cloud;
When blows were met, there were thunderings loud;
Flashes of light struck through the air;
Intense colours struck all eyes with glare;
And the hero and Skoll fought with such speed,
that one couldn't see how the duel did proceed!

This great duel that above the armies did appear
filled many a warrior's heart with utmost fear.
For to be in a battle is already something grim,
and the magic chaos above them made hope seem dim;
For the unknown is able a hardened heart to stun –
And both wolves and men began to break away and run.

Both armies then had to rouse and rally their own,
but the young hearts in Ulrik's army were fear-prone,
and despite Ulrik's desperate commanding,
Lobo's left wing dissolved, unwithstanding.
Ulrik, unable to keep his clan from flight,
made towards Lobo, to rejoin the fight.
Likewise, werewolf Cortard could not maintain Sigrimew's right,
as fear injected itself into his troops like a blight.

Hemming and Lobo then met on the field,
each demanded of the other to yield.

Each instead of an answer threw a blow;
And thus a duel was fought twixt foe and foe.
Lobo was winning, but then Hemming did retreat;
Zhao Yoon's sword then did general Lobo meet.
Zhao Yoon's swordplay was of amazing skill –
at one point he had the chance the wolf to kill!
But as his blade came down, Ulrik pushed Lobo aside;
Ulrik received the killing blow, and Ulrik then died.
And thus the son with honor repaid his father's debt –
life for life, as fair a price as any that could be set.

Lobo, enraged at pup Ulrik's death,
lunged at Zhao Yoon with a curse on his breath.
Zhao Yoon had by now lost his sword
and death was almost upon the lord,
but in the end he managed to escape
though grievous wounds on his body did gape.

Skoll in his duel did his efforts intensify,
and more violent became the flashing in the sky;
Then there was a sudden blaze and burst...
Then Skoll fell out the sky, headfirst!
The werewolf crashed to the ground in utter defeat...
After all, who could ever our hero beat?

The nameless traveler gently beside Skoll landed,
and Skoll said, "So, victory to you is now handed.
And I can feel now my life ebbing away,
with only my foe to hear what I say...
Well, foeman, give me a little concession,
and listen now to my dying confession.
Should I curse the day, should I curse the hour,
that was there when within woke my lust for power?
I was nothing, until this inner drive,
made me for greatness suffer and strive.
It was this hope that filled me with elation;

This hope that one day I may rule my own nation.
And yes, I would sacrifice many for my mere hope;
Yet does not all greatness with great dilemmas cope?
I ask not forgiveness, for I lived as wisdom deems:
better to die, than to live forgetting your dreams...”
Skoll’s body then gently faded like vapour, out of sight,
for Skoll had drawn on his very life force in the fight,
so desperate had he been to win,
so desperate to not give in,
that he used up all his life energy
to try achieve final victory.

So much for Skoll; meanwhile, the battle raged –
The Shan cavalry once more Randulf engaged,
Guan Yung hoping to break Lobo’s right
and to change the course of the fight.
And though Randulf and his werewolves fought courageously,
his lines were at last broken by the Shan cavalry.
The wolves did what they could to slow the tide,
while Randulf rushed through to Lobo’s side.

“General! Broken and shattered is your right wing!
We must retreat before the Shan around us ring!
I know you would rather die in battle, but that aside,
there is no need to slaughter us all for the sake of pride!
Let us retreat while we may,
and live to fight another day.”

And Lobo saw no sense in letting more of his wolves die,
when the chance of victory so clearly from them did fly;
To continue the battle would have been suicide –
so Lobo the call for retreat roaringly cried.
And Sigrimew let him go, and did not order pursuit,
for her own army seemed battered and irresolute;
So she decided to first regroup and reorder,
before pursuing Lobo across the border.

Back into old werewolf country Lobo did retreat;
Once his army was safe, he and Randulf made time to meet.
“Well general,” Randulf said, “Shall we make a plan,
of how we are going to strike at the Shan?”

“Weary am I of battle, weary am I of war,
and I do not want good wolves to die anymore.
If good old Skoll were here, I’m sure he would have found a way
to inspire me to carry on the war, come what may.
But he is gone, and Ulrik went too early to his rest;
Not counting you, I have lost those who reflected my best.
Now Sigrimew, that wretch that consorts with stinking monkeys,
is about to march her army into the wolf counties,
which can only bring grief to my homeland.
That is a thought that I cannot stand.
This army fought well, and you, Randulf, fought superbly;
Let us end this, let this army now disbanded be.
And I shall go myself, and alone face the Shan,
that they may know wolf as more glorious than man!”

Randulf little understood Lobo’s predilections.
Randulf enjoyed both wolf and girl in his seductions –
Randulf with his handsome red hair
in both human and wolf forms was fair,
and he was so interesting and charming
that everywhere he was girls deflowering.
But he knew he would never change Lobo’s racist view,
so he bid the general a comradely adieu;
For Randulf yet another adventure came to an end,
and he with laughter and song sought some other quest to tend.
Lobo’s beaten army then did dissipate,
while Lobo marched back to his final fate.

And so did the Battle of Red Cliff turn out;
Yet within you, I am certain without a doubt,

is the aching curiosity
to find out what happened at Jen Li.

Warg knew Dundee could not fight during the day,
for sunshine kept all vampires at bay –
for when the wererat race chose undeath, this was their curse:
they became vampires, to glorious sunshine averse.
So Warg ordered his goons to attack at noon,
Sweeping down into Jen Li like a typhoon!
They then broke down each household door
searching to find anything in store;
But as I have before mentioned,
the people in a cave where stationed –
so as much as they searched, they found nothing of note;
Each household was empty of loot, of even a mote.
Warg the Dreadful, his words bursting with ire,
ordered the whole town to be put to fire;
And his gang with torches set all aflame,
and all of Jen Li up into smoke became.

But for Warg it was not enough,
and he shouted out in a huff,
“Where are the cowards that lived in Jen Li?
Where is that bastard, the vampire Dundee?”

One of his gang, who had once lived nearby,
answered thus to his werewolf leader’s cry:
“Up in the mountains is a group of caves;
Perhaps there is where retreated these knaves.
I know very well each and every hill;
Let us search there for what we would gladly kill.”

Warg, eager to pursue
this new avenue,
ordered his gang up the mountain path,
hoping to find the objects of his wrath.

At a dark opening they gathered round –
‘twas the very first cave that they found –
one of them walked in, blade ready,
his eyes with a look fierce and beady...
In the darkness of the cave he was instantly
thrown back by a powerful blow from Dundee!
As the poor fellow flew through the air
(a look of pained confusion he did wear),
Warg shouted, “The stinking bastards are in here!
Get in, and with their blood these cave walls besmear!”

One by one the bandits charged into the cave den,
one by one the bandits were thrown out again!
Deep in the cave huddled the villagers of Jen Li,
where they retreated when the smoke of burning they did see;
And when Dundee they roused from his usual noontime sleep,
he told them not to fear, he will the cave in safety keep.
Near the cave’s front he stood to stop the attack
and he easily beat Warg’s bandits back!

Warg himself then marched into the cave,
and a furious fight for Dundee gave!
Warg had a simple strategy to make sure he won:
his battle plan was to drag Dundee into the sun!
The werewolf kept trying to pull Dundee out,
so Dundee had to keep withdrawing in this bout;
And thus for many rounds the duel went to-and-fro,
their battle cries through cave and hill did echo, echo.
Fierce was the desire for victory in both hearts
as they fought with all their skill in the martial arts.
Warg fought with a fury that Dundee could barely match,
and into the light did Warg almost Dundee snatch!
Dundee knew he could not until sunset keep up the fight –
at some point Warg, fighting with all a werewolf’s raging might,
would be able to drag Dundee soon into the light,
and there beat him under the withering sun bright.

So Dundee shouted
as they bouted,
"Damn bandit wolf, run away while you still have a chance!
I have no choice but to quickly end our little dance!"

To which in reply
the werewolf did cry,
"Stinking batboy! Do not waste your breath!
I will fight you to the very death!"

"As you will!" our vampire then said,
and all his magic into his fist he fed,
and he sent a powerful blow
straight into his werewolf foe.
Warg the Dreadful fell backwards, and blood he coughed and
spluttered;
Dundee's punch had every organ within him ruptured!
The bandit leader gurgled a final curse,
then his life from his body did disperse.

Warg's bandit gang, at the outcome of the brawl,
decided to flee on seeing their leader fall –
since Dundee had barely enough of his strength left to stand,
he was quiet happy to be rid of the rogueish band!
And little Li-en came out the shadows to hold his hand,
and Chief Lu declared Dundee a great hero of the land;
But Dundee amidst the bustle fell promptly asleep,
so tired he couldn't even his head upwards keep.
Thus was the village of Jen Li
saved by the awesome Dundee.

Now back to Lobo
let my story go.
Alone, he marched towards Sigrimew's camp,
the evening air flecked his fur with damp;
He walked strong and tall, ready to play his part;

Though a slight stoop showed how heavy was his heart.
It seemed to him that all he believed
was now into shattered pieces cleaved;
To him, the world had become strange,
altered by the cold winds of change,
which cared nothing for what he had in thought,
and made mockery for what he had fought.
Yet, all he could do in response was to fight;
Lobo knew no other way to find respite,
even though he knew his actions himself would send
plunging madly into nothing but a bitter end.

A patrol he encountered, three men he slew;
One of the bodies into the army camp he threw;
Thus the general, by this bold act of harm,
announced himself, to the army's alarm.

Spearman immediately surrounded Lobo,
but so utterly fierce were the eyes of their foe,
that they were afraid to start fighting,
and instead stood there, Lobo encircling.
This circle of spears then moved through the camp,
the speartips glinting in the light of each lamp,
following Lobo as he walked stoically through,
as he sought an audience with the Empress Sigrimew.
And every now and down an archer sent from his bow,
into the middle of the circle, a rough-aimed arrow;
But though the arrow tips pierced Lobo's flesh
he walked oblivious to his wounds so fresh;
He just kept walking, with a distant look in his eye;
What did it matter, when he was ready to die?

Sigrimew by now had come this hubbub to see,
and when she saw Lobo, she cried indignantly,
"You treasonous wretch! What fool's errand do you do now?
My one hope is that you have come to grovel and kowtow!"

“Gladly would I grovel, my queen, and kowtow,
if only you’d be willing to promise me a vow;
If you only speak the words, then do with me as you will,
and I’ll allow myself to be killed or wrought any ill.
In fact, to all injury would I be keen,
if you would promise me one thing, my queen:
don’t let men ever think themselves equals to us,
why should we werewolves allow them to think thus?
If they are worthy they would not be so weak,
vulnerable to whatever whims we wolves would wreak.
Above all, promise never again with a man to lie,
for I cannot bear the thought of mongrels born thereby.
Do not taint the purity of werewolf blood, know your place!
You’re supposed to be the guardian of the werewolf race!”
Thus said Lobo, presenting the choice
in his speech with passionate voice.

To which Sigremew, letting her rage out,
replied to with a commanding shout,
“I am the Daughter of Heaven, Empress of Shan!
I am the rightful ruler and Queen of wolf and man!
How dare you speak in such a manner obscene!
How dare you utter such things to your queen!
You asked for a promise, but I’ll give *my* vow:
Lobo, you scum, I myself will kill you now!”

Then Sigrimew shapechanged and did transform
into her powerful and sleek werewolf form;
Then she leapt straight at Lobo
and viciously engaged her foe!

And they fought, round after round,
raging blows between them did pound;
Though Sigrimew’s troops wished to interfere,
she kept yelling at them to not draw near.

This was to be her duel and her fight –
her way of setting her pain within aright.

It was a nasty fight of claw against claw;
Sweat dripped, blood splattered and bits of fur tore;
Each inflicted quite a bit of harm...
Then Lobo managed to break Sigrimew's arm!
She fought on, despite that her arm was broken,
as if all it did was more rage to have woken.
Lobo was struggling too,
but then a strong blow he threw,
and the queen fell down,
blood trickling from her crown.

For a moment she wished to just lie there,
to give up and give in to death and despair.
Then suddenly she heard Mai Doon's voice,
“Get up, get up, you still have the choice;
I am always right beside you dear;
Why do you give in to your fear?”

She would never know if it was just the knock on her head,
or if it really was a spirit that those words had said.
But those words made her get up from her fall
to fight, broken arm and wounds and all,
and she leapt straight at the throat of her foe,
and with her teeth she ripped it out of Lobo!

Lobo gurgled, and struggled to breathe,
his helpless fury did boiling seethe,
as he clutched at what had formerly been his neck
but was now a useless bloody mess of a wreck.
He sank in weakness to his knees,
as his blood drained to the lees.
The wound was mortal, so Lobo knew;
He could fight no more against Sigrimew.

“Bring me the rune sword of the Dukes of Shang Fu
that I may this bastard, with his victim’s blade, hew!”
At the empress’s order
the sword was brought to her;
It was unsheathed, she took it with her uninjured arm;
She brought it down and down in strokes of angry harm.
As she struck, she yelled and howled and cried
and kept hewing long after Lobo had died.

The nameless traveler stepped up to her and grabbed her hand,
and said, “Empress, the fight is over, as I understand.
Your majesty is victorious, you may sheathe your blade;
Your enemy, rancorous, the final price has paid.”

Sigrimew saw how correct were the words of the hero:
Only then did she realise that quite dead was Lobo.
So she stepped back and dropped the sword
that had once belonged to Shang Fu’s lord.
She spoke, “I had thought that with Lobo dead,
that some order would return to my head;
That the pain that sits like ice in my heart,
would suddenly flit away and depart.
Yet now he lies deceased, and Mai Doon does not return;
I have avenged my loss, but yet my heart still does yearn...
What was the point of all this blood and battle din,
when what I want is to hear Mai Doon’s gentle guqin?
I can summon armies, and I can wreak utmost wrack,
but what good an empire that cannot bring Mai Doon back?
I have finally done it, my lover I did avenge;
But only now I sense the meaninglessness of revenge.
Bitterness I still feel towards my mortal foe.
Nothing is gained, and what is lost remains so.
Though this may like a victory appear,
the truth is that there are no victors here.”

The hero asked her to allow her wounds to be tended,
to this the Empress Sigrimew finally consented;
And the best physics used their skill in healing charm
to bind her wounds and to fix her broken arm.
Lobo's body was chopped into several pieces,
and then buried here and there according to caprices.
That no one Lobo a martyr may there hark,
each site was kept secret, without a gravemark –
for those few who thought Lobo a hero,
there would be no gravesite to visit and know.
Back to Peiping returned the Empress Sigrimew,
and peace to the Shan empire returned anew.

Meanwhile in the little village of Jen Li,
well recovered from his bout was Dundee.
He aided the villagers in rebuilding each home
(though his heart urged in vengeful pursuit once more to roam).
And with his aid, it was at a rather brisk pace
that the village was more or less back in place.

Then the villagers of Jen Li began to grieve,
for Dundee insisted 'twas time for him to leave.
Not even little Li-en could convince Dundee
to stay longer as an honoured guest of Jen Li.
But just before he left, they threw a celebration,
and to return anytime they gave invitation.
So in the end, Dundee was really just 'passing through' –
Chief Lu, Li-en and the whole village bid him 'adieu.'
Thus began Dundee L'Aster's quest once more,
to avenge his father's death, so long before.

Meanwhile, the object of his quest
was receiving all the best;
He received the Empress' honour at her court,
for having at Red Cliff the victory brought –
for without the hero, Skoll's havoc would have had its way –

in the end it may have been Lobo carrying the day.
She invited him to join her service permanently
to which our awesome hero declined politely;
He explained that he had many adventures yet in store,
with many great deeds to accomplish, and then some more.
He had to travel to where he was needed most,
and would now have to leave his most gracious host.
The Empress Sigrimew bade him go well,
her generals their well wishes came to tell:
Hemming and Cortard; Zhao Yoon, Zhang Fay, and Guan Yung;
Though they still knew not his name, his praises they sung.
The nameless traveler then went on his way,
to some new land to venture to save the day!

Thus I've given you his adventures in the land of Shan,
and how he had to foil werewolf Skoll's most villainous plan.
But other stories have to myself been told,
of our hero, so wonderful and bold.
Of these great tales that have come to me from far and near ,
Next time I'll share another tale that has reached my ear.

To be continued in the Borderlands and Orenai...

A note from the author:

Wow, you're already through most of the story! At this point, the full version of this story has a chapter set in the exotic Arabian Nights setting of Kaikobad. The full version also has an extended prologue, numerous deleted scenes and dialogues, and an extended final chapter with two extra characters! This full version, Ballad of the Nameless Traveller, is available for the special price of \$4.95. For the latest purchase links, please visit tomekpiorkowski.com

But if you're not interested in buying the full version ebook, please let me know why at tomek.piorkowski@gmail.com , I'd really appreciate it!

And now, I present the final chapter of Song of the Nameless Traveller...

The Ballad of the Traveler in the Borderlands and Orenai

Once upon a time
in the swampy clime
that formed the border between Trivanrum and Orenai,
Lord Falcon watched warily for the troops of Mordecai
from atop the fortress wall
that stood so strong and tall
over the sparse mountain sands
on the edge of the Borderlands.

But no army did he see coming from the swampy east;
Instead to the west he saw what he expected the least:
one solitary rider on the horizon bleak,
coming in from a desert which was not for the meek.

Lord Marmion Falcon (for that was his name in full)
declared, "What trick is this that Fate wishes to pull?
Who comes in from that trackless desert, is it friend or foe?
I pray, Gods, for now is it time for your help to show."

And by him came his trusted friend, the wizard Ezzadane,
who looked at the rider, and said, "You may your fear restrain.
There goes the nameless hero
who, on that day long ago,
at the fortress Mandalay
managed to save the day."

The traveler rode up to the fortress gate,
and a request to be let in he did state.

Cautiously, the Borderland troops let him in.
Already, rumour was making a din –
From mouth to ear and back to mouth spread gossip-talk,
as among them the hero dismounted and did walk.

Our hero was handsome, noble, strong and tall;
and admiring gazes upon him did fall.
(Many wondered at how he had survived,
wandering a desert where nothing thrived.)
His horse was a beauty indeed,
a fine example of a steed –
her red eyes flashed with courageousness, one could see;
The grimmest fate would not dissuade her loyalty.

“Welcome, warrior of great fame,
the one who walks without a name.
Know that now before you in this dark time stands:
Lord Falcon, ruler of the Borderlands.
And here for Orenai’s army I wait,
wondering what will be our fate.”

The traveler bowed before the noble lord,
“I am honoured to offer you my sword.
I too know of the mustering of the Orenai,
that soon they will march and the art of war will ply.
I ask for the privilege to join your glorious band,
that I too for the sake of the world may fight by my hand!”

Lord Falcon said, nodding his assent,
“To your request gladly I consent.
Though the task may yet be a suicidal one,
once the war with Orenai is truly begun.
I have sent for help to places far and wide,
yet no one, till you, comes to stand by my side.
Orenai, by Ezzadane’s word, will soon come marching
and I have only my loyal army for the mustering.

We try to be brave, but we fear we are outnumbered,
with an overwhelming task we are thus encumbered.”

“Noble sire,
it’s not so dire.
Surely your friend Ezzadane
has made this to you plain?”

And Ezzadane spoke, “I’ve told him of the prophecy,
that may be to our final victory, the key.
Orenai is mustering, and we must defend the land;
But now I have discovered what Mordecai has planned.
The ancients werebats who locked Uzoom in Koshtira Belorn,
that dark mountain in the Orenai range, all forlorn,
prophesied that one day that a hero
shall ride forth to thwart the demon foe.
And according to it, four shall go with him,
to thwart the fate that hangs over us, so grim.
We’ve been fortifying here, but we wonder what to do,
for what good is this army if a demon is in view?
Yet, before into despair we go,
I wonder, are you not that hero?”

“Perhaps...” said our traveler, “We’ll see what’s in store.
But I still await the coming of the prophesied four.
Now, may I ask for the chance to sleep,
in this wonderful fortified keep?”

Falcon laughed, and said, “Of course you may rest!
And with drink and food you shall also be blest!
Let us enjoy this peaceful night,
for soon we shall be lost in the fight!”

The fortress was set on a mountain path;
and the night wind, seeming full of wrath,
descended from the hills,

smothering one with chills.

And the cold spread into the Orenai;

But it would not deter Mordecai.

Despite the cold night his loyal generals he called,
for no longer would he allow his plans to be stalled.

On the plains where his army was gathering,
to his tent he called his generals to meeting.

His generals came, members of the four clans
that Mordecai had united as part of his plans:
The Imps, Goblins, Pixies and Witches of the Orenai,
that had been at endless bloody war before Mordecai.

The witch-king, as always, was dressed in robes of white;
His stern eyes were with intelligence nonetheless bright.
His face was etched with as many defeats as victories,
though his mouth was quick to smile, he was easy to displease.
But even if his rules were strict, his heart could be kind,
and his demands were never unfairly designed.

“Through manifold sufferings I’ve toiled with my hands,”
Mordecai said, “but peace I have brought to these lands.
But this sad world full of pettiness,
is yet yearning for me in readiness.
Finally, I am prepared to take ultimate power,
and nearing is history’s most triumphant hour,
for I shall unite the entire world
and a Brotherhood of Man shall be unfurled.
Now on the cusp of my greatest victory,
I need you now, to foil the prophecy.
The so-called ‘wanderer’ will come
from the Borderlands near Trivanrum.
Take my army and southwards go –
stop anyone who could be my foe...”

Mordecai paused for a moment, his eyes became cold,

and a silent fury across his face did unfold.
His gaze was fixed at the entrance of his tent,
and the generals' eyes following that gaze went.
In the torchlight was sitting there a cat,
a rather suprising thing to look at!

And Mordecai
with hate in his eye,
said the following,
his mood glowering,
“Familiar, what are you doing here?
Why do you insult me by coming near?
You abandoned my side so long ago –
I who am your master, you made me a foe.
In my kindness I chose to accept your exile,
though you aided the traitor Skoll, a deed I revile;
In truth, for the honour of my witch-king crown,
I should have ordered that you be hunted down.
And then you dared to take an apprentice!
An act, of your vileness, quite portentous.
And as if teaching my teachings was not dire,
I found out that you were teaching some mangy vampire.
Yet, for the sake of my old affection for thee,
I was willing to let it go and let you live free.
Why then do you come here and stoke my animosity;
Did you come to make peace, or out of curiosity?”

The cat had a stretch, and licked a paw,
and spoke without a hint of any awe,
“My lord, my master and my king;
As of old, I ask only one thing.
I must make this last attempt to avert total doom,
and make a final stand against your plan to raise Uzoom.
I request you to forego your scheme, master,
for I'm sure you steer yourself to disaster!”

Mephisto's words angered Mordecai,
and this the witch-king said in reply,
"Souls both great and vile have flocked to my cause,
that I'm trusting is perhaps one of my flaws.
With treachery and treachery I've had to deal,
as one after the other itself did reveal.
Werewolf Skoll fled, Shirinar I sent away;
That psychotic old bat L'Aster I kept at bay;
And I swear my former teacher Alhazred
was plotting to make me one of the undead.
But the only treachery
to cause me true injury
was that of your own treason, Mephisto.
Now you dare to tell me 'forego, forego'.
You bit the loyal hand that fed you,
now you expect that hand to pet you?
For long enough I have your existence tolerated –
now under my law you shall be exterminated!"

"My Master!" cried Mephisto, "Life is cruel!
Let it end one or other way, in this duel!"

Mordecai leapt into the air, blazing with power,
with that fierceness that had made so many cower.
Mephisto summoned his will, and threw forth a blast
of frightening fire that was exploding and vast;
But Mordecai countered with a magical wind,
that with its icy breath the fire pinned.
Fire and ice merged in a furious storm,
that shook and shook the fraught tent's struggling form.

The two mystical powers thus contended,
in a magical battle most splendid;
Each to his own force did stoke –
till at last Mephisto's flames broke,
and Mordecai's ice struck the cat,

and knocked the poor feline flat.

Mordecai's generals grabbed the cat, and bound him with rope;
Mephisto, broken and defeated, now lost all his hope.

“Foolish cat! Did you think you can stop me?

Now you will die in utmost misery!”

Mordecai spat out these words, all enraged;

He then ordered the cat beaten, then encaged.

They hung Mephisto in a barren location –
there to die, exposed, of utmost privation.

Thus, he who had driven back the Ghouls from Orenai,
he who'd united the four tribes, this leader: Mordecai,
defeated his former familiar, Mephisto.

But although his men cheered the defeat of a foe,

Mordecai's generals couldn't help say,

“If only there could have been some other way.

For was there ever

a cat so clever

as magical Mephisto?

I certainly don't think so!”

Mordecai then outlined the rest of his plan:

He ordered Goldry of the Goblin clan

to march south, and to invade the Borderland,

and to stop anyone who northwards to come planned.

He himself would go to Koshtra Belorn,

where he would make Uzoom to be reborn,

for soon the planets in their constellations

would for such workings be in the proper stations.

He dreamt that once he had of Uzoom the mastery,

that the whole world would be forced to bend its knee;

And thus out of fear of the demon-god's hands,

would Mordecai force union of all the lands!

He asked only Brandoch the Witch to come with him,

to aid him with the task of raising a demon-god, grim.

Hook-nosed Goldry accepted his master's will,
and he promised to lead with his utmost skill.
Then Brandoch promised to serve the witch-king with his life,
to face all challenges, no matter if hopeless the strife.
Thus Mordecai north to many mountained demonland went,
while Goldry with Orenai's armies southwards he sent.
And Mephisto, in a cage suspended, beaten, dying,
helplessly watched from where he was thirstily lying.

Dawn came warily to Falcon's mountain fort,
as the troops there in readiness did comport.
But then they heard the happy din of a friendly army marching in.
The flags of the royal house of Trivanrum
fluttered through the pass, to sounds of the drum.
Lord Falcon was roused, and eagerly he did greet
the leader of the new army, the prince Araneet!

"Hail comrade! I would sooner die than ignore
the Lord Falcon, who had helped me once before!"
So cried Araneet, eager that his debt be repaid,
for the time the Borderland had given him aid.
But alas, Araneet's brother, now Rajah, had refused
to send his valiant troops, though they sat around disused.
Truth be told, Rajah Arrand still was sore
at Falcon's rebellion from before,
and though he could see how Falcon had tried to be just,
yet to Arrand, Falcon was one who'd broken a trust.
Arrand stubbornly would not consent
for the army to Falcon to be lent;
So Araneet took his own personal guard,
and set off with three hundred men, marching hard.

Now at the time a certain werewolf was causing trouble,
and he'd left Trivanrum (and its laws) on the double,
only to stumble on Araneet and his men,

who took the daring fellow prisoner then.
In too much of a hurry to return,
Prince Araneet ordered in words most stern
to enchain and to bring along the werewolf –
and thus to the Borderlands was brought Randulf!

Strong, handsome and alpha, even in his chains,
Randulf had the look of one who fate disdains.
Regret was a feeling he refused to feel,
and his knee was not made in order to kneel
(though perhaps if he'd not seduced an aristocrat girl,
he'd never have set Trivanrum's lawkeepers in a whirl!)

The three hundred men
were settled in then,
and Randulf locked up securely in a jail,
(to plan an escape his mind began to avail.)
Ezzadane
then did complain,
“To all surrounding lands have we made:
a plea for help and requests for aid.
Yet only Prince Araneet with his personal guard
could bother to aid us in the coming battle so hard.
Why is that when it comes to the fate of the world,
so few are willing into the breach to be hurled?”

And our nameless hero answered, “As far as I ken,
most are sheep, a few are wolves, and even fewer are men.
I no more feel like blaming people for avoiding strife,
for I know how little they see beyond their own life.
But worry not, for those brave few who will with us stand,
I'm sure will be of the stuff to give us the upper hand.”

The brave Prince Araneet
was then surprised to meet
the nameless traveler,

And when he learned of the hero's quest
for Mordecai's demon summons to arrest,
he at once volunteered to be of the prophesied four,
and an oath of loyalty to our hero then swore.

Then the hero went down into the jail,
where Randulf his jailers with stories did regail.
And our nameless hero asked the werewolf to join him,
on his quest, an adventure promising to be grim.
Randulf spoke, raising his one eyebrow,
“And why, sir, should I make a vow
to follow you deep into the ghoulish swamps of Orenai
to foil this supposed scheme of one called Mordecai?
Though it sounds grand, and I hate to sound like a wussy,
right now I just want to get out and go chase some pussy.
What service, what good would it be for me,
to plunge into darkness so heartily?”

To which our hero sighed,
and thus to Randulf replied,
“By the end of this, your eyes will burn with mystery,
and all sorts of ladies will wonder so at your history,
then no longer will you need to chase tail
for girls will make themselves easy to avail.”

Randulf's eyes widened, his spirit was set aflame;
Was this what he needed to elevate his game?
“Well,” he said, “I've always said that it's a crime,
to rot away in boredom, to waste away your time.
Rather grant me a minute in which to live,
and a life spent dying do not to me give.
And if for naught else I'll have a story,
to crown my manliness in greater glory.”

Thus two companions were allied
to our nameless hero's side.

(Though some were surprised at prisoner Randulf's inclusion, they felt it well, not into the choice to give intrusion.)

Now, in a not-so-far-away place,
there was a cave, and in that space,
was a bat sleepily passing the day,
waiting for the sunlight to go away.
Thus the hero looked upon the mountains with certainty,
knowing that soon enough in pursuit would come Dundee,
and that true to the prophecy's word,
that he would be his companion third.

The hero spoke to Ezzadane,
"Two I've gathered to be Uzoom's bane;
The third one is coming, and soon will be here;
But as for the fourth, I shall need a volunteer."

And the wizard replied,
"Let me with you ride;
And with our combined power,
we shall surely win the hour!"

Thus it was that a prophesied four were to go,
delving into Orenai with our hero.
The rest of the army would remain,
the defense of the fort to retain.
But as Ezzadane, Sinbad, Randulf and Araneet
made last preparations 'fore going forth their fate to meet,
there came forth from the swampland:
Goldry's army, with swords at hand!
And Goldry, never one to believe in slack,
ordered his weary troops straight to attack!

Fax Fay Faz was a fearsome warrior mage;
He cried, "Goldry, allow me the first blow to wage,
for the honour of my teacher, Mordecai,

and for the glory of our home, Orenai!”

And Goldry was well pleased with the Pixy’s zeal;
He laughed and said, “Fax, let them under you reel!”

Green eyed Fax Fay Faz was the Witch-king’s greatest pupil;
And great was the power and extent of his magic will.
He leapt up into the air,
with death in his stare,
and sent a terrible magical force –
onward to the Borderland fort was its course!
It blazed and it roared and it thundered on,
like a sudden storm it was to gaze upon.
It engulfed the fort, and the fort started shaking,
and great was the terror induced by its quaking!

But the wizard Ezzadane was not afraid,
for he knew which counterspell was to be made;
And while chaos was around,
he his inner magic found
and summoned a magic blast that ruptured Fax’s spell –
for the moment all within the fortress was again well.

Lord Falcon’s voice rose, commanding through the air,
ordering his troops battle at the foe to dare.
For no sooner was the magic dispelled,
when the plains with Orenai’s army swelled.

Goldry’s Pixy wizard Fax Fay Faz was undeterred
that the full effect of his power had been deferred;
He flew through the air using his magical will,
determined his power upon his foe to instill.
Fax cried, “Which of you wretches matched my power?
Show yourself, that I may make this your final hour!”

And Ezzadane waved his staff at the young upstart,

“Do you think your foe lacks courage in his heart?
Your hubris shows that you are wrong –
for old as I am, my will is strong.
Let us now duel in great travail,
and let the greater spell caster prevail!”

Ezzadane summoned a whirlwind, and on it he rode,
and sparks of power from his flashing fingertips flowed;
Fax Fay Faz knew he was in for his greatest battle –
he summoned so much power the very sky did rattle;
Then the two mighty wizards clashed there in the sky,
and great was the magic that between them did fly.

While they duelled, Goldry and his army marched near,
and at Falcon’s troops he let off the following jeer:
“My name is Goldry of the Goblin clan;
To smash your little fort is my plan!
Who of you would dare face me in a duel,
and dare match my warhammer, great and cruel?”

Our hero asked Falcon permission to face Goldry,
to give Lord Falcon a chance his army to rally;
And Falcon eagerly gave assent;
So the hero to Goldry went,
riding his magnificent steed,
ready to do daring deed.
Behind him, Lord Marmion Falcon led
the army with a courageous tread.

Straight for General Goldry was the course
of the nameless traveler and his horse.
Upon a red charger was Goldry riding,
and towards the hero it too was striding.
The hero drew his sword against the Goblin’s hammer;

Neither of the two ‘gainst a soldier’s part would shammer²³!
Round after thundering round, blow after shuddering blow,
whirled the sword and the hammer twixt the hero and foe.
And by them Borderland and Orenai clashed,
as the two armies against each other crashed.

But up above Ezzadane and Fax,
were ever increasing in their attacks;
And neither knew who would have the upper hand
as each the other’s magic could barely withstand.
Their magic became increasingly fierce,
as if the very sky they would pierce.
And finally so hotly did they engage
that their magic started spilling in rage.
And the armies below them had to contend,
with blasts of magic force that did descend!

Goldry, in a moment’s respite, gave this outburst,
“Fax, you mad Pixy! With what madness are you cursed?
This magical assault will tear both armies apart!
As much as it pains me, it is now time to depart!”

One last time Goldry’s hammer parried the hero’s sword,
then the Goblin disengaged from the nameless martial lord,
and midst the screeching magic bolts that round them did beat,
Goldry’s voice boomed through the air, calling for a retreat.
Marmion Falcon too ordered his troops to fall back,
and within the fort to take refuge from the magic wrack.

The nameless traveler too summoned his magic will
and magically protected the army from ill;
The Borderland army thus safely reached their lofty fort,
while Goldry’s army backwards in good order did comport.

²³ Shammer – to shirk one’s duties in a deceitful manner

But Ezzadane and Fax carried on their fight,
and the hours dragged on as they proved their might.
The ground trembled and the sky tore,
and upon them was a wretched downpour,
for the very essence of storms they threw at each other;
Wind, hail, lightning, rain - these they hurled at one another!
They tore up the soil and boulders they did heave,
scattering stones as the giant rocks they'd cleave.
They summoned tornadoes and roared the world with thunder,
and bangs of echoes thronged as they tore the air asunder.

At last, exhausted, they reached a stalemate,
with no more will to more magic create.
Stumbling on the ground, for they no longer could fly,
they glared at each other with an evil eye.
Too drained to engage in physical blows,
insults and taunts were exchanged between the foes;
Which eventually became a debate,
on life, god, wisdom, death, purpose, truth and fate.
Even in this they could not reach a firm ending,
with neither wizard as a victor pending.
Both swearing that they'd win the next bitter round,
and that the other would as prisoner be bound,
in the dead of night, they decided to call it a day –
and in the dark each wizard back to his side limped away.

Fax Fay Faz was stumbling, cold, shivering, bruised and wet,
from battles that involved many an elemental threat.
Goldry had been waiting for him, and ordered Fax carried;
By the Pixy's warm bed, the Goblin by his friend tarried.
Fax Fay Faz, with an ever-paling face,
spoke with a slowly faltering pace.
“Tend to me, my friend,
for I am near my end.
Ezzadane's magic has torn me up inside,
and now slowly into my death I glide.

Mortal are my wounds, and beyond healing;
But what gives me the most painful feeling,
is that I feel like I have failed my country, Orenai,
and that I've not lived up to my teacher, Mordecai."

And Goldry told him, "No,
you shouldn't think so.
No man should ever be ashamed of trying his best,
and with your great service, Orenai has been blest.
Now enjoy every comfort I may give,
and I ask of you, try to live;
While you try to pull through your hurt, I will not leave your side,
till from our shores pulls away this melancholy tide."

Meanwhile, the old wizard Ezzadane had stopped short,
unable to go the last short distance to the fort.
But Falcon and some soldiers forth did roam,
and the battered wizard they carried home.

Exhausted, but without serious injury,
Ezzadane lay down, holding his foot gingerly.
In the fight his foot had been struck by a stone,
and it seemed that it had managed to break a bone.

"I fear that I cannot go as promised," Ezzadane said,
"For now upon this broken foot I can barely tread.
I have failed the prophecy; Now who shall go,
and as the fourth, help the hero against our foe?"

And Lord Falcon to this replied,
"I in your place shall bravely stride.
Stay here, recover, and protect this place
in case that wizard again shows his face.
And you brave soldiers, listen to me your liege:
Do not venture forth, but sit out the siege.
Merely make sure that Orenai's army there, you pin –

for indeed, the real fight we against Uzoom must win.
Night is upon us, let us brook no more delay,
nameless one, let us right now go on our way!"
And thus the four heroes set out before the morn,
on a quest to stop Mordecai at Koshtra Belorn.

Holding their steeds
by their leads,
past the Orenai camp the men attempted to sneak,
wary of making their steps sound even a little creak.
The hero used his magic to help keep them shrouded –
the sentries did not notice their vision become clouded!
And their ears did not heed
the clip clop of each steed.
Thus they managed, undetected,
to pass through, unsuspected;
And not long after they, came Dundee,
flapping his bat wings silently.

Fax Fay Faz was having a restless fevered dream,
of how some foreign magic in the air did gleam;
And he saw through his dreaming eye,
of how their prey had passed them by.
Up from his sleep, into consciousness he would climb –
Fax Fay Faz forced himself to wake up, one last time.

"Goldry," he softly whispered, with pained belaboured breath,
"Accept my last service, here on the brink of my death.
I felt the magic of the man that we seek.
Three men with him past the camp did sneak;
After that flew something that smelled like the undead,
Perhaps it was a vampire, crossing overhead.
There's no need into the Borderlands to go...
For there you will not find our leader's foe...
Chase after them, Goldry, into the Orenai...
And stop them from interfering with Mordecai....

Goldry, I feel my heart go weak...”
And with that, Fax no longer did speak;
His eyes closed and his soul from his battered body flew
(I’d be lying if I told you I knew where it went to.)

Goldry, who’d been keeping vigil at his friend’s side,
allowed himself a moment by that bed to abide;
“Farewell,” the Goblin said, “And may no one say,
that utmost bravery you did not display.”

Then the general summoned those whom he thought the best,
and with the following words his soldiers he addressed:
“The enemy we sought in the Borderlands,
has even in this hour slipped through our hands.
My hands are tied – if I turn this army back,
we expose ourselves to a rear attack.
Therefore yourselves, who of my army are the best part,
must backwards into Orenai immediately start.
The one of the prophecy and his four,
must not be allowed to complete their chore!”

Serving Orenai was the goblin Galland,
wise and wily in the hunt and strong with his hand.
Galland was well versed in the tracking art,
And eagerly in the pursuit took part,
and finding in the swampy grounds some or other trace,
he directed the Orenai troops on the chase.

Ambush after ambush the heroes fought –
with such danger was the passage fraught!
After one battle, Araneet was cut off from the rest,
at around the heat of midday time, or so he guessed.
In the battle’s course,
he’d even lost his horse.
Having lost his friends, he vowed to help them another way,
and with his own sneak attacks, the enemy did waylay!

Galland, seeing Orenai suffering loss
from Araneet's attacks left, right and across,
decided to change who he was tracking:
He'd now chase him who was them attacking.

Araneet made ready his bow for one more hit-and-run,
wandering what to do when all his arrows were done;
When his sense of danger cried alarm,
and he leapt away, just avoiding harm.
An arrow past his face
singing through the air did race.
Araneet immediately answered the attack,
by rapidly firing an arrow right back.

"You missed!" cried a voice from the shadow.

"Wretch!" Araneet cried, "Show yourself, foe!"

A Goblin tribesman stepped out into the light –
a seasoned warrior, ready for any fight.
As a short gesture of truce, he raised his hand,
and said, "Well met. I am called Galland.
A most excellent dodge you gave my arrow,
clearly you are not an easy one to harrow.
But though you have my admiration,
I must stop your further causation
of injuries to my soldiers, comrades and friends –
for a man of honour, his companions defends.
And I hope that I have your understanding, not your blame."

"What does it matter? Battle is battle. Have my name:
I am Prince Araneet, at home I'm a soldier of fame.
Now let us fight, for to run away is a soldier's shame!"

Each was known for war prowess in their respective lands,

each was a master of the weapons they held in their hands.
Araneet fought with daggers, Galland with a trident spear,
and for many long hours they clashed with their martial gear.
Neither of them were available for their sides' cause,
as the duel went on and on without a pause;
And slashed were their bodies with lines of red,
as from their many wounds they slowly bled.

At last Araneet, his will to fight ever strident,
with a mighty blow shattered Goblin Galland's trident.
Then forcing Galland upon his knees,
Araneet would not listen to his pleas;
And while staring into the Goblin's eyes,
the prince slashed his neck, causing his demise:
But something in Galland's eyes poured horror into his soul,
something about those cries for mercy, made his mind unwhole.
Gone mad, Araneet drifted back home,
terrorising all as he did roam.
He attacked all, for in his mind gone insane,
it seemed that all were foes, needing to be slain.
His clothes were filthy, his hair was long and wild;
No one was safe, whether man, woman, or child.
But he encountered, on one fateful day,
a holy man passing across his way;
And as Araneet readied his dagger to chop,
the wandering monk calmly looked at him, and said, "Stop."

Clarity returned to the prince's mind,
and peace in the holy life did he find,
for Araneet straight away became his disciple,
and learned from him compassion, to forego ill-will.
Araneet grew to preach the way of the holy life,
and taught people to live calm, abandoning strife.
As he gathered followers, it was so:
He had become a spiritual hero.
At last, against even war making a stand,

he attempted to stop his brother Arrand.
When the rajah wished to again invade Allepay,
the former prince stood resolutely in his way.
But the rajah would not listen to his pleas,
and strangling him, forced the monk onto his knees;
Arrand with his own hands the monk did smother,
and thus Arrand murdered his own brother.
Thus Araneet was ended, his holy life fulfilled,
and the wheel of karma for him was stilled.
And still his teachings live on and inspire,
and give courage to those lost in the dire....
But why do I drag this tale in the wrong direction,
and risk as a story-teller, losing your affection,
by dwelling on the tale of some other?
Back then to our nameless traveler:

Still fighting their way into Orenai,
to stay clear of ambush the three did try.
Getting nearer to Koshtra Belorn, they marched warily,
mindful that fresh attacks may come momentarily.
So far each ambush they had managed to overcome,
in the end managing to escape rather than succumb.
Into the swamplands, deeper and deeper they did go;
As afternoon came, they carefully listened for the foe.
And by landmarks they did infer,
that near to the ghoul swamps they were.

But an Orenai band led by the witch Juss²⁴,
had managed their rough location out to suss.
They combed the area, looking for their prey,
eager again to engage them in a fray.
It was Juss himself who found the tracks of our three;
And he ordered them to be attacked instantly.
As the Orenai troops were heard coming near,

²⁴ 'Juss' - Rhymes with 'fuss'

Lord Falcon said, "So near the goal we now appear.
Why should we let these fools, us further delay,
when it is Uzoom that we must keep at bay?
I volunteer to go forth and these troops to harry,
for too long here in these swamplands do we tarry.
I will keep them back with my sword and scorn,
while you two race forth to Koshtra Belorn!"

The hero, looking at the setting sun, knew without doubt
that his time to stop Mordecai was fast running out.
Also, his magic will was being used up with each fight,
slowly sapping him when he needed to preserve his might.
He approved of Falcon's plan, and cast a spell,
to make it seem that they were there as well;
And while he and Randulf on did ride,
illusions of them stayed by Falcon's side.

Not realising that two illusions he did see,
Juss was exultant when he at last saw the three
just standing in the path, waiting,
at last from onward rush abating.
Juss ordered that his troops his foes surround,
that any plan to escape they could confound.

But Lord Falcon laughed at them all,
his swinging blade upon them did fall.
He charged into their ranks,
not caring about his flanks.
Was it luck or was it skill,
that protected him from ill?
He smashed through them, and galloped away,
and then turned back, taunts at them to spray.
Juss, furious, gave chase with all his hosts,
riding after Falcon and his two ghosts;
Not realising that he was on a merry chase,
that Falcon simply wished Juss' aim to displace!

At length the magical illusions dissipated,
in a ruse Juss realised he had participated
as the twin ghosts by Falcon's side dissolved.
Juss to chasing our hero was resolved –
cursing Falcon, Juss blew upon his war horn,
turning his men back towards Koshtra Belorn.

Lord Falcon wandered on, lost and disorientated –
in the dark swamps becoming quiet irated.
At last, to the Borderlands he found his way back,
where he was in time to lead against Goldry's attack...
But again I digress - the fate of the Borderland
must wait until I complete the story at hand.

Our hero and Randulf carefully rode,
wary of wandering into the ghoul's abode.
As the sun set, they carried on as the dark unfurled,
knowing that time was becoming short, to save the world.
But Juss, caring little for the ghoul threat,
pushed on, trying our heroes to net.
And, somewhere in the swampy Orenai stark,
Dundee awoke with the coming of the dark.
Coming out of the shelter he made,
readiness in his eyes he displayed,
to renew his pursuit of the nameless hero –
a pursuit that had started so very long ago.

But as Dundee prepared once more
to carry on his unending chore,
he was startled by a shimmering ghost,
in the shape of his former master and host.
The spirit of Mephisto was before him,
and Dundee bowed to the cat's shape, so dim.

“Dundee, silly bat.

Why are you doing that?
Stand up, apprentice, and listen to me: I am dying,
and life will soon depart the cage in which I'm lying.
No, do not think to come and rescue me –
I am too far gone to save, Dundee.
Apprentice, will you grant me my final request,
and honor your former master's last behest?"

Dundee replied, "My teacher and master,
what do you ask of your student L'Aster?"

Mephisto then the following meowed,
"I know that you are quite proud,
and that revenge you have long sought
against him whom your father fought.
But that same one that you seek,
is the last guard against the bleak.
Know Dundee, that the demon-god will soon arise,
and lead to what may become the world's demise.
A prophecy exists that states the world may be saved,
but only at ultimate cost to those that fate had braved.
The nameless wanderer must be allowed to go,
to Koshtra Belorn where he will face the foe;
And may he save us all from painful doom
at the hands of the demon-god Uzoom!
If you would not help him, at least retreat,
and some other day perhaps you will meet."

Something in the way Mephisto spoke,
a terror in Dundee's heart awoke.
He could feel the fear bedeck
with hairs the back of his neck.
There was a horror evoked by the name, 'Uzoom',
and thoughts of things that were best left in a tomb.
Dundee's instinct was to run away,
to keep this evil at arm's bay.

And something in his memory spoke cold and chill:
“Do as you will, but... it will be to your ill.”

But even as these thoughts came,
Dundee felt within his heart flame
the courage that had pulled him
through days most dark and grim.
And thus he then spoke to his former master,
“I believe you, teacher. I, Count Dundee L’Aster,
will not just stand by while the world is in danger,
and for now I’ll not quarrel with the nameless stranger,
and neither will I stand aside and do naught,
while with peril our world is being fraught.
I admit that just now a great cold fear through me ran –
I thought to be a coward; But I choose to be a man.
Though I fear that my very life
will be harrowed in the strife,
and though I feel an unknown sinking dread,
I will seize my courage and rise instead.
Mephisto, my teacher, you saved me when I was weak;
You fed me in my hunger, and sheltered me when meek.
How can I refuse what you ask?
I will do this forthcoming task.
And for your honour and your sake,
I will my utmost efforts make.”

Mephisto replied, “Don’t worry of my honour’s sake,
when it was my honour, such a noble student to take.
Now I can calmly go to rest,
for I know you shall do your best.”
The ghostly cat then disappeared into the air,
released from a world full of toil and unhappy care;
And there where Mephisto’s encaged body lay,
the cat to this world gave his last breath away.
Dundee felt a sorrowful pang within his heart,
knowing that his teacher forever did depart.

But let me take my story and your mind's eye,
back to another part of swampy Orenai:
Witchman Juss' reckless march had found its prey,
and the hero and Randulf were plunged into the fray.

In the swirl of fighting thus actuated,
Randulf and the hero were separated.
But the werewolf did not battle less fiercely,
with his fighting art of most high degree.
Though outnumbered, yet his Orenai foes,
struggled to rein in his flurry of blows.
But absorbed in the battle, they did not realise,
that in ghoulish territory rang their cries.
For in the fight they had pushed into the ghouland –
where Mordecai had exiled the ghouls by his own hand.
The ghouls watching silently,
eyes hungering expectantly,
using magic to lure the warriors inwardly,
so that deeper they strayed into their territory:
The Gruesome Swamp where, it is said, no-one can pass through –
for in its dark, you would only be food for the grue!
When they realised how deeply they had strayed,
the former foes knew they needed each other's aid
if they were the ghouls to overcome
and not as their victims succumb.

Mordecai had by means of a great spell,
forced the evil ghouls in exile to dwell,
in a small patch of swamp in Orenai,
there hopefully eventually to die.
The ghouls and their grues fed on human misery,
to inflict torture and pain was their ecstasy.
They unleashed themselves one time upon the Orenai,
and would have invaded the world, if not for Mordecai;
But they were only contained in their land constricted,

after much horror, death and pain had been inflicted.
And ever after they still lusted for human flesh,
ever ready a new victim in their swamp to enmesh!

Against such, Randulf and his new allies
had ways to survive readily to devise...
But in that evil unwholesome place,
where the ghouls twisted time and space,
to the horror they fell, dying one by one...
In the end, only Randulf his freedom won,
and back into the warm light of goodly day,
his anguished sorrowed steps stumbling did sway.

Randulf never did reveal what happened in that dark,
what had harrowed his face, and made his eyes so stark.
And quiet became his chatty mouth and mind,
no longer witty lines willing to unwind.
But there was now a glint in his eyes,
of one who all challengers does despise,
of one who has achieved some ultimate aim.
And lo, girls came to him like moths to a flame,
unable to resist his aura of mastery,
and Randulf indulged - albeit mechanically.
Through further adventures our werewolf drifted,
till at last some of the horror from his mind lifted.
He settled in Shan, with a human girl a third his age;
To his many mongrel children, he was a father sage;
His community looked up to him
for leadership when things looked dim;
And in that little corner of Shan he did grow
in his old age to be the local hero...
But I'm sure that your eyes do now roll,
as you watch me again lose self control,
and again let my tale twist in the wrong direction,
when the nameless one should be in my recollection!

Back then to our nameless hero;
After clashing somewhere with the foe,
he managed to lose Juss and his folk
after invoking some magic smoke;
Juss, fearing that he may stumble into ghouland,
reigned in those loyal fighters left in his band.
(In horror he found some tracks to be traced,
belonging to his men that had Randulf chased.
When he saw they had plunged into Gruesome territory,
he assumed that never again he would those men see.)

Our nameless hero and his loyal horse,
now alone carried onward in their course.
But while Juss rallied and regrouped his men,
the last of Goldry's search parties arrived then:
The five Armelline sisters were fighting Pixies fierce,
whose envenomed weapons poisoned as they did pierce.
The youngest was secretly in love with Mordecai;
Prezmyra was her name, for her love she'd anything try.
Tracking stealthily with their Pixy magic,
on the traveler's trail ever did they stick.

Mevrian, the eldest, in the bright moonlight
stepped before our hero, her spear flashing bright.
Our hero's horse snorted, eyes flaming, ready for a fight;
The hero sighed, wondering if he'll find some peace that night.

"Halt. No further shall I let you go,
for my king has declared you a foe.
Stand down, return the way you came,
or else you cannot myself blame,
that I shall meet you with my poisoned blade
and that we this night mortal blows shall trade."

Our nameless traveler to this said,
"My lady, I will not turn back my tread.

I know you wish to protect your king,
but disaster to this world he would bring.
Rather, it is you I ask to turn from the fight,
that I in turn may save this world from dire plight.”

Having thus made their positions clear,
in challenge Mevrian then shook her spear;
And the other four sisters then did appear,
with expressions quite grim and austere.

Our hero was more than a match for these five,
as in combat he and his horse then did strive.
Easily beaten back, the sisters desperate became,
for they had sternly sworn never to retreat in shame.

Two sisters fell in battling our hero and his steed,
but the remaining three sisters still refused to concede.
One of them, Sriva, cried, “I swear this horse I will break!
Let me at her, while you two, its rider do take!”
Sriva leapt at the mare, not caring at all
if in the duel she herself should fall.
The horse reared up and brought down its hoof,
smashing Sriva Armelline’s skull’s roof;
But before she received the killing blow,
her spear across the horses’ thigh did go,
and though the wound should have been slight,
‘twas enough to give poisonous blight.

Mevrian meanwhile was locked closely in duel, e
ach blow and counterblow her rage did only fuel;
While Prezmyra felt a growing despair,
at failing the man for whom she did care.
And a desperate plan did unwind
from the far reaches of her mind.
“For Mordecai!” she cried, and striking from the rear,
she impaled her own sister Mevrian with her spear;

With a hard thrust forward, Prezmyra her weapon pressed,
so that it ripped through the other side of Mevrian's breast;
And with Mevrian locked so closely in contest,
the tip travelled on, and into the hero's chest!
Thus did this poisoned dart sink into the hero's heart!

Mevrian turned, shocked that her sibling
would unto her do such a thing.
As she died her eyes gazed accusingly,
and the last thing she heard was an apology
from her sister, who then turned and fled –
perhaps Prezmyra was filled with dread?
Prezmyra tried to find her way back to Mordecai,
but was never again seen in the lands of Orenai.
In all likelihood she stumbled into ghoulish lands,
and met a horrible death at their fiendish hands.

The nameless traveler, his heart impaled,
drew in a shudder as he inhaled;
And grasping the spear shaft, it he broke,
and threw into the swamps that dreadful spoke.
But the poisoned spear tip remained stuck in his heart,
in such a way, that 'twould be death to remove that dart!

Our hero's horse was not feeling well,
as her leg with the poison began to swell.
So the hero in pity did not atop her ride,
and he led her on foot with his own faltering stride.
It was only by his supreme force of inner will,
that the hero struggled on despite the poisoned ill.
But the spear tip shard within him,
continued oozing poison grim,
and every heart beat sent a shatter through his mind's eye,
for the tip jabbed, and pain across his mind would fly.
Then, he lost the way - with his mind so jumbled,
into the ghoul swamp him and his horse stumbled.

As the hideous ghouls jabbered near
hoping to net them with magical fear,
the hero realised his mistake.
His power again did awake.
He raised his sword and cast upon it a holy light,
which rays penetrated into the gruesome night.
Then the ghouls and their grues shrunk away,
like darkness fleeing the early light of day.
And the hero and his horse
carried onwards in their course,
now undisturbed by the evil things in that land born,
they went on, though wounded... On to Koshttra Belorn.

With step after faltering step, our hero did trudge;
Fighting his poison, while leading his horse through the sludge.
When he felt his hand pulled back with a tug,
he could feel the reins of his steed backwards shrug –
the reins out of his cold tired fingers dropped.
Our hero turned to see why his horse had stopped.

By the light of his shining sword, he saw his steed was ill,
the poison seeped into her body, sapping all her will.
Her red eyes once filled with fight were now full of tearful pain,
trying to follow her master was now too much a strain.
Her eyes seemed “I’m sorry” to say,
then the poor steed’s legs gave way.

The mare fell to the ground,
with a heavy thudding sound.
And she looked up at her master, helplessly,
while not far behind some grues laughed gibberingly.
Our hero cradled her head in his hands,
this steed who with him had braved many lands,
who had crossed oceans and deserts without complaint;
Who could fiercely fight and, when ordered, show restraint;

Who had ever been beside him where he had traveled,
ready for any danger that may have unraveled.
But now both of them knew better than to pretend,
that it was not, for that magnificent mare, the end.

And ghouls and grues looked on expectantly,
hoping to devour the mare ravenously.
But first they'd torture and prod and kick,
and laugh at her each and every wrick²⁵.
And once they'd had their full of her misery,
they would kill the horse, slowly and painfully.

The poor horse looked at our hero,
with eyes that forgiveness did show,
that asked for her master to do one last thing,
so that fate may not into ghoulish hands her bring.
And aching grief swept through our hero,
he tried to find some way the task to forego;
Then he realised that there was no avoiding the deed –
in order to save her from the ghouls, he'd have to kill his steed.
He raised his sword; his steed's relieved eyes seemed to thank...
A moment later, into her his blade then sank.
His horse died, as he his steed tenderly caressed;
Then on he went, while within his sorrow he suppressed.
And behind, the grues their howls of agony did not stem,
for they felt that their prey had been taken away from them.

At last the hero emerged from that swamp, tired and worn,
and found himself at the foot of Koshtra Belorn –
wherein was carved a long staircase
that led up to Uzoom's resting place.
And sitting on the bottom-most stair,
a man was playing a melody fair.
His fingers clever and astute,

²⁵ Wrick – a painful muscle spasm

danced on the strings of a lute.

It was Brandoch, Mordecai's trusted man,
a member of the same Witch clan.

Our hero walked up to the musician,
and said, "A beautiful composition."

"Thank you very much," said the Orenai Witch,
as from string to string his finger did switch.

"I composed this tune, thinking of glorious deeds now past;
Dreaming of youthful times, that I thought would forever last,
when I rode at the side of Mordecai,
before the united armies of Orenai.

I remember how it seemed dark and grim,
when he united the four tribes under him,
and led us against the rising tide of the foul ghouls.
I can still hear the cowards jeer at us, calling us fools,
as they ran away, while we plunged into the fight.
Then, I did not know if we had sufficient might;
But despite myself, my faith in my leader was strong –
I knew I'd stand beside him, even if he was wrong;
He inspired me so, that to die for him was fine:
He had but to point, and I'd stand at the battle line.
And how amazed I was, after battles brutal and long,
when we against the odds beat back the ghoulish throng.
I gazed at that man, with his impossible schemes;
In awe I saw the completion of all our dreams.
We were victorious, when all along,
there were those who said Mordecai was wrong.
Now, I long for those days, which glory did adorn,
when my faith was blind, for now my heart is torn.
I still follow the word of my master,
though I sense an impending disaster,
for I fail to see what good will come from this Uzoom.
Surely for good cause the werebats banished him to this tomb?
And now in rebellion against the odds,

goes my king, Mordecai, to tame demon gods.

Well, he's been called mad before –
who am I to question his lore?"

Brandoch reached a more intense part of his melody,
and his fingers rapidly played the lute skilfully.

Our hero had this to say,

"Up those stairs lies my way.

Will you allow me to go,
or shall you stand as my foe?

The rise of Uzoom will only bring destruction,
surely you yourself have made that deduction?

We must this scheme disallow,
and I must stop Mordecai now."

Brandoch played his lute harder, and the strings broke;

He looked at his broken instrument, and then spoke,

"Oh well, I suppose it was not meant to last for long;

Once we had dreams, now we don't know right from wrong.

May my tune be remembered as my last, greatest song,
that showed my honour and my love were both verily strong.

Now let's fight, for I will not abandon my master,
even when plunging into the mouth of disaster!"

Like swallowing a bitter pill,

our hero summoned his will

to force his poisoned body to move;

For Brandoch a worthy foe would prove.

At the foot of the demon staircase of Koshtra Belorn,

Brandoch prevented the hero from reaching his bourn.²⁶

It had reached the hour of midnight,

as they continued their moonlit fight.

Brandoch was steadily losing, but he summoned his will,

²⁶ Bourn – destination. Rhymes with 'corn'

and allowing all his power into his blade to distil,
with a mighty swing he smashed the hero's sword;
Pieces of the blade through the air then soared.
But Brandoch had not managed to wound our hero;
And the Witch, exhausted, let his blade from his fingers go.
The hero, with what was left of his sword at the hilt,
immediately at his witch foe that remnant did tilt.
It plunged into Brandoch's chest,
and thus his life from him was wrest;
With his last gasps he reached for his lute,
and then, forevermore, he was mute.

Our hero was now dreadfully tired,
too much of his will had the fight required.
Our hero stumbled and crawled up the demon stair,
although anew the poison through the hero did flair.
His limbs seemed to feel so heavy,
and his movements became unsteady,
as he slowly lost the battle against the dart
that was seeping venom into him, via his heart.
He could feel his entire strength ebbing away
as more and more he fell under the toxin's sway.
But he forced himself onward, crawling –
till he could no longer, sprawling.
For the very first time, our noble hero felt meek;
A strange emotion, for one who'd never before been weak.
And in fear and in despair and in pain,
he called out to the skies, his voice did strain:
“Gods, I have ever been your servant contentedly;
But now I need help – why have You forsaken me?”

There was no answer, the stone steps seemed very cold;
It seemed that the claws of death were ready to unfold,
that despite all his efforts past,
that now he would breathe his last.

But suddenly a sword by his face did float –
‘Twas a blade, not death, now touching his throat.
Our hero strained upwards to see,
and he saw over him kneeling : Dundee!

After many years of searching without rest,
at last he had found the object of his quest.
Dundee was holding a sword to our hero’s neck,
and something was holding the vampire in check.
Easily could he have killed the hero then,
like a helpless lamb in a wolfish den.
But his promise to Mephisto kept his hand back,
and though tempted, he chose to refrain from attack.

Dundee stood up, and put the sword aside,
and the hero’s weakened state he eyed.
Using a spell that Mephisto had taught,
Dundee his magic will upwards brought;
He sent healing energy into the hero,
And this healing power tenderly did flow.

The power was profoundly reviving,
As Dundee to heal his hurt was striving.
The poison from his weary limbs seemed to recede,
the embedded speartip seemed to less impede.
Re-energised, he was able again to stand,
ready to carry on the struggle as planned.

Dundee then spoke, “Do not think that I forgive you;
Once this is over, my father’s death you will yet rue.
This thing I do I undertake
for my former teacher’s sake.
Now you must go on, for my master did say,
that only you have the power to save this day.
As for me, I’ve noticed that following you is a force,
some troops of Orenai, who I doubt your quest would endorse.

I shall stay back here and I shall keep them at bay,
that they may not interfere as you go on your way.”

Thus did Dundee stay upon the demon stair,
while our hero up the mountain did fare.
Still a thousand steps he needed to climb,
upwards on the old worn stones, covered with grime.
But though Sharzade’s potion had revived him,
yet the poison again seeped into each limb;
For the spear tip remained embedded in his heart,
and the draining toxin’s effects once more did start.
This time though, the venom managed to find
a way into our nameless hero’s mind.
Though his legs were still quite strong enough,
yet his mind could only will them to scuff;
For his spirit was sinking into despair –
his ordained fate just seemed too much to bear.
He stopped halfway up to the tomb,
wherein was sealed demon-god Uzoom;
And he sat down on a step, with his hands cradling his head,
unable to overcome his growing sense of dread.
He was so burdened by hopelessness,
that he was paralysed by helplessness.
And the arrow of suffering in his chest,
beat him on with pain, giving him no rest.

The nameless traveler raised his eye,
and saw he was already quiet high,
that of the surrounding lands he had a view
as his vision across the horizon flew.
Far off in the distance he could see the Borderland fort;
He saw that by it flames were dancing about and athwart.
The death of Fax made Goldry feel much shame,
Goldry the Goblin himself did greatly blame.
So he had sworn to destroy the fortress wall.
He succeeded, and a part of it did fall –

that was the cause of the fires
now dancing around the spires.
Indeed, Goldry in this assault almost took the fort,
when the returning Lord Falcon this attack did abort.
There in the distance a rough battle was being waged –
the hero, with his magic eye, watched them as they engaged.
Although passionately they did brawl,
yet they seemed so ant-like, so small;
Pathetic, insignificant in the face of it all.
All that work, to be blown away as soon as comes a squall.

What for? What for? What for?
This thought drummed in his core.
A spear tip was in his heart, and his body ached;
With pain and misery was his mind thoroughly raked.
How easy to be a hero, when healthy and strong;
How difficult, when one forces one's body along.
Why bother? Why bother? Why bother?
Helplessness his being did smother.

And our hero with his prophetic eye,
gazed and saw what in the future did lie:
A world ravaged by Demon-god Uzoom,
cities and nations brought to their doom;
Men, women, children in utmost agony,
dying enslaved to the demon villainy.
What good was the human race,
if that was the fate they would face?
Then the nameless traveler looked once more,
at that one fate he had always looked at before:
Where he would confront Uzoom,
in the demon-god's mountain tomb,
and there, in a great endeavour,
he would defeat the beast forever.
But he could not tell, if he would survive,
if after that battle, he'd still be alive.

He knew he might not win if he did not reveal his name;
For without a name, his true power he could not claim.
But also he knew, if his name was revealed,
that would end his life, his fate would then be sealed.

Then the poison soaked more into his mind;
It took all his hope and struck it blind,
And then he saw no way out,
and die he would, with no doubt.

What was the point of this then, surely he *would* die;
And if death is the final fate, then why bother to try?
The demon-stairs were high,
and he was too weak to fly;
He could just jump off and that would end his life;
What need to bother with effort, with strife?
So easily could he throw off all his cares,
and let the world sort its own affairs.
Our hero rose, and decided to leap,
to throw his body off into the deep...

Then he stopped, and as if awakening from a sleep,
sense and reason into his spirit returning did creep.
“If I *must* die, why must it be here?
What good is it, to give in to fear?
If it ends the same, why should my hope drop?
Carry on, there is no reason to stop.
To my quest my soul must be employed;
If I die here, the world will be destroyed.
If I die there, if I my fate would brave,
then this wide world yet I still might save.
Only one life, to save so many;
a bargain, better than any.”

Our hero looked upon the wide land,
that from his vantage point across spanned,

and said, "My Lord, my God, I cannot lie:
I am afraid, for I do not wish to die.
But freely You give life, without asking for pay –
why should I be spiteful, and for more life pray?
As if this gift were not marvellous enough,
why should I demand even more, in a huff?
I give myself up to Your Holy Will,
and I'll let my roaring doubts grow still.
I remind my heart that it must be brave enough to live,
as others have done before, that the gift of life may give.
Through this darkest of night,
I shall reach for the light;
And come what come may,
I shall try seize the day!"

The hero carried on up the demon stair,
although the pain within did fiercely flare.
Up, up, until he reached a place sombre and grave.
Halfway up the mountain, the stairs stopped at a cave,
wherein the werEBats had, long ago, sealed the demon threat,
when in ancient times the demons the world had beset.
The cave had been locked by the werEBat folk,
with a mighty stone... ..that Mordecai broke.

The rock that had guarded the world for an age,
was now shattered in pieces, as if struck in rage.

Something flickered from the dreadful tunnel's end,
faint fingers of light through the cave it did send.
It was a brightness from deep within the hill;
Whatever was shining was not warm, but chill.
But it was enough to light up this tunnel,
that into the mountainside did funnel.
And so our nameless hero
into that tunnel then did go.

Meanwhile, the last of Juss and his troops,
were marching up the stairs in groups;
These Orenai soldiers were worried lest
they should fail to stop the hero's quest.
Stunned, they found dead Brandoch, but past the body they rushed,
vowing to bury him on their return, in whispers hushed.
Up the stairs they did scurry,
but although in a hurry,
they halted and were surprised to see
standing in their way was Dundee.

"Halt there, you shall ascend no more;
Turn back, or we'll soak these steps with gore."
Thus spoke Dundee, in the setting moon's light;
Strong, commanding, and ready for a fight.

And Juss came forward, and greeted, then spoke,
"You cut a grand figure, in that scarlet cloak.
But I ask of you, why do you stand in my way?
At such an hour, near when night turns to day?"

To which Dundee then replied, "I made a vow,
to my master, that Uzoom's rise I'll not allow.
I owe him a debt that I cannot repay,
and thus I honor my teacher this way."

"I too," said Juss, "Have an obligation,
let me explain it with a narration:
I was a child when the ghouls attacked,
I watched as they my village sacked.
My parents died before my eyes,
and no one heard my pitiful cries.
As the ghouls were coming toward me,
I was too terrified to even try to flee.

"In that hour of my darkest despair,

when into the face of evil I did stare,
the ghouls were suddenly driven back
by an incredible counter attack.

And I saw this man, who would later be my king,
as he fearlessly upon the ghouls did spring.

I saw him wield such fearsome power
that those evil things back did cower.

Mordecai took my pathetic self into his arm,
and then promised me he would protect me from harm.

I was tiny, and he was big, fatherly, strong;
He was the only thing right in a world of wrong.

“He saved my life, and right then I swore,
an oath that burned itself into my core:
That I shall loyally serve him as my master,
and follow him even to the jaws of disaster;
For he is my king, my hero, my prophet;
Unto him, all I am I do commit.
Now stand aside, for I will not break my troth;
Get out of my way and let me fulfil my oath!”

Dundee refused; Juss ordered an attack,
to make a way through, with slash and hack.
As they fight, let us to the cave return,
and let's the nameless hero discern.

The nameless traveler had just passed through the cave,
and around the cavern in the mountain, a look gave.
The inside of the mountain was a huge room, hollowed out,
with a wide pit in the middle, which cold light did spout.
Upon the walls of this hideous crypt,
were written spells in ancient werebat script;
Written with blood, and still manifesting a holding spell,
that the demon-god's power continually did quell.
Thus in limbo was Uzoom kept sealed,
such great power did those mages wield.

The pit in the middle seemed to have no floor,
as if it stretched down forever and then some more.
And Mordecai stood by its gaping maw,
with eyes of steel and a firm-set jaw.
He was about to complete an intricate spell,
that the rise of the demon-god would impel.

“Stop!” cried our wounded hero,
“I ask, that this course you forego!”

Mordecai, startled, turned to see,
who had talked so impertinently.
The Witch-king looked upon our hero,
and what Mordecai then said went so:
“It is you. Whenever I made progress, I then did stall;
whatever avenue I took, you would build a wall.
In whatever part of the world where I hatched a plan,
you finished my schemes even before they began.
I’d have long ago been able to raise Uzoom,
and would have witnessed all my dreams come to bloom;
It’s as if you worked tirelessly without slack,
to time and again set me and my agents back.

“And for what end? Surely my task is not lowly,
surely my aims are honourable, good and holy.
With the demon-god at my command,
I shall unite each and every land
as I march with the armies of the Orenai,
and all peoples in brotherhood I shall tie.
I will end all misery, war and strife;
Justice shall rule in all aspects of life.
Don’t you understand? I am the hero of this story!
To myself shall come all the power and the glory!
This is my dream, to bring peace to the entire world,
to allow a golden age upon it to be unfurled!

Do you see, it's not for my sake that I do this,
but for others, that they may live in peace and bliss.

“But perhaps you consider me too brisk,
to deal with demons, to take such a great risk.
But since when has anything great been achieved,
without the dangers of that what you've conceived?
To hesitate now, that I cannot afford;
Only from great risk can come great reward.
So what if this action could myself destroy?
Don't starve of my dreams, rather push me to cloy.
After all, it doesn't matter if we live or die –
what matters in the end is that we dared to try.
Now bear witness, and stand far away,
and watch as I my power display.”

Mordecai returned to his summoning spell,
and the hero leapt forward, this attempt to quell.
But Mordecai, casting two spells, with his left hand
threw a magical blast, like a firey brand;
While with his right hand he continued to summon Uzoom
from the depths of the glowing pit, the demon-god's tomb.

The magic blast flew straight at our hero;
The hero curled his fist and against it did throw;
The attack shattered, flaming shards scattered,
and the traveler was safe momentarily.
But our hero in horror then had to see:
Mordecai complete his spell.

The very room seemed unwell.
Something felt very wrong;
Time itself seemed to prolong.
And from the depths of the pit, one could there surmise,
that something at the bottom was beginning to rise.
It grew larger and larger as upwards it rose,

and the mountain rumbled as if in agonied throes...

Up from the pit came Uzoom,
up from what had been his tomb.
Like some ancient horror risen from its grave,
huge and hulking, the demon-god filled the cave.
It put two mighty claws down alongside the pit;
Each of those huge fingers 'round a man could fit.
Its dragon wings expanded like thunderclouds,
and filled the room like two unholy shrouds.
Its reptilian eyes opened, revealing a cruel gaze;
It was the figure of Mordecai that they did appraise.

Mordecai, undeterred, summoned a magic coil,
that like some living snake did writhe and roil.
Like some sailor trying to spear a giant whale,
the Witch-king the coil against the dragon did flail.
It wrapped itself around the demon-god like a rope,
so tightly, that to escape it seemed there was not a hope.

“Demon! Obey me who has summoned you!
With your power, a new world order I'll hew.”

Uzoom blinked, and laughed very loudly,
“Such a worm, and he speaks so proudly!”
As if it was thread, Uzoom tore the magic cord;
And said, “You clearly are a mighty human lord.
A mere demon you'd certainly subjugate,
and bind forever to serve you in your fate.
But you did not research your odds,
when you chose to vie with demon-gods.”

And Uzoom took Mordecai up in one mighty claw,
before the witch-king another binding spell could draw.
No mercy unto Mordecai would be shown –
into Uzoom's mouth the witch-king was thrown.

The demon-god bit hard repeatedly,
and the witch-king then died rapidly.
Then the demon-god swallowed, and rubbed his tummy,
and with a horrid grin upon his face, said, "Yummy!"

The nameless traveler, although he was weak,
would not against the demon-god be meek;
Hoping that he his quest and destiny could now fulfill,
the hero summoned all that was left of his inner will.
He flew through the air, putting all his force into one blow,
as he a mighty punch against a demon-god did throw!

But the demon-god did not even so much as twitch;
Uzoom laughed, and said, "Well, mighty one, you made me itch!"
By the legs, Uzoom then grabbed our nameless hero,
And like a rag doll against the wall the hero did throw;
Then again, and again, against wall and wall;
Bones crunched and snapped, then Uzoom let the hero fall.
Our nameless traveler on the cave floor did sprawl;
Never before had he been so battered in a brawl.
His body was bleeding, battered, bruised and mashed;
He could barely open his eyes, his face was so gashed.

Our hero then knew, that for all his efforts and trying,
that if he did not use his name, he would end up dying.
So he summoned up what was left of his inner will,
to force his body to live on for a few moments still.
The hero, despite his broken legs, made himself stand;
The nameless traveler at Uzoom raised a mangled hand.

"Ho ho! The worm still lives!" Uzoom commented,
"Has it not yet enough been tormented?"

The hero replied, "If it is all the same,
give me a moment to tell you my name..."
The hero spoke.

His power awoke.

His name came out as a mighty roar,
so loud that the roof of the cavern tore;
The earth shook, and the mountain top erupted;
Thunder flashed, waters heaved, the world was disrupted!

But before I go on, let us step back a bit;
That I return to Dundee, I'm sure you'll permit.
A fierce moonlit battle was waged on the demon stair;
Juss and his men did not well against Dundee fare.
The steps were littered with the corpses of Orenai men,
until it was only Juss and Dundee left fighting then,
as on the horizon a faint line of light,
showed the sun was about to end the night.

Dundee said, "You are the last. Do you still aspire,
to try and defeat me, when I'm an undead vampire?"

Juss looked upon the day as it began to break,
and replied, "Too much effort I need not make.
See how the dayspring does awake;
The sun will soon all your power take.
But I wonder: I've heard in an old Orenai tale,
of how a werebat of the Star clan did assail
the demon army on these very stairs...
I wonder if you are not one of his heirs?"

Dundee cried, "I know nothing of ancient history!
You stall me! Well never mind, let the sun shine on me!
Fight me! And do not your battle spirit quell!
I'll fight come sun or dark, come paradise or hell!"

Weary but proud and unyielding, the two fought on,
and across them slowly the sunlight shone upon.
Dundee's skin began to burn, and hot grew his pain;
The more the sun rose, the more Juss advantage did gain.

But just as the witch was the fight about to win,
there was a suddenly a great cacophonous din;
A roar, like a voice shouting a billion things,
like some monstrous bird thundering its epic wings.
(‘Twas the moment that our hero his name revealed,
and had unlocked all the power within him sealed.)
The earth shook; The mountain exploded; Rocks began to fall;
Avalanches here and there around the mountain did sprawl.

In that moment of confusion, when both were stumbling,
Dundee slipped and into Juss was thrown, tumbling.
The vampire took the chance to bite Juss’s neck,
a move the Orenai man was helpless to check.
Juss managed to beat Dundee off him, but it was too late;
Dundee’s blood with Juss’s mingled – undeath was his fate.
Juss’s body was already transforming;
The sun on his skin was painfully warming;
But he cried, “Never mind that you’ve made me a vampire!
I pledged my lord to fight, no matter how things seem dire!”

So they fought on, their flesh burning off in clumps;
Their fingers and fists became charred, smoking stumps.
Skin peeled off their faces; the unrelenting sun rose,
and on the shadeless demon stairs shone on the two foes.

At last, Juss’s will was broken - on the ground he did crash;
And his undead body shrivelled, then turned into ash.
Dundee, smouldering, under an Orenai corpse did crawl;
And in its scanty stinking shade, he curled into a ball.
So we leave Dundee, lying under one of Juss’s men;
And I turn the story back to the traveler again.

His name revealed, golden power flowed out his body,
bathing him in light, healing every injury.
The hero pulled out the arrow buried in his heart;

The hole from it closed even as he threw away the dart.
A mighty aura surrounded him, blazing;
He stood, strong and noble and amazing.
His tattered clothes mended, and changed colour from black to gold;
In that cave, it was quite a wonder that did unfold!

The roof of the cavern had been completely blown away,
and the last few stars could be seen, greeting a new day.
Uzoom, covered in falling dust, at the hero stared;
Strange unknown feelings through his dark demon heart fared.
“I’ve awoken at last, having slumbered so long,”
the demon said, “and now strange thoughts through me do throng;
For though an eternity I have lived, yet now here,
you have taught me one last lesson : the meaning of fear.
I know who you are, I know what you are meant to do;
I know who sent you, and from where this power you drew.
You would have died either way...
But now I too must die this day.
Well... I will not just give up and kneeling lie!
I will show you how a demon-god can die!”

Uzoom flew up from the pit and into the sky,
the morning sun glinting on his wings as he did fly.
The hero flew after him, and pulled him back by the tail,
and the demon-god helplessly downwards did flail.
Uzoom then tried to strike out at the hero,
but every claw swing was just too slow.
As if teleporting, the hero flashed from spot to spot;
Everywhere Uzoom’s claw was, the hero was not!
Then the hero started gently slapping the beast around,
but each effortless slap did the beast powerfully pound!
The demon-god was flung from place to place,
unable to keep up with the hero’s pace.
Finally, the hero managed to summon up his will;
He made ready for his ultimate task to fulfill.
He launched a gigantic magical blast;

Never before had such power been amassed!
It struck Uzoom, and covered the demon in light;
The demon-god quailed in the glory of its might.
The beam blazed and blazed, unrelenting;
Uzoom's body began dissipating.
And with one last unholy dying roar,
the demon vanished, gone forevermore.
The demon-god Uzoom was at long last dead,
and would never again fill the world with dread.

Our hero, powered by renewed inner will,
flew straight out of Koshttra Belorn's accursed hill;
Gliding down the demon stair,
he of Dundee became aware.
He covered the burnt, shuddering man with his cloak;
The vampire from some delirium then awoke,
and asked, "Why do you shelter me from the sun?"

"Because," the hero replied, "Your work is done.
Let me now take you some place where your wounds can mend;
Though an enemy, you are also my greatest friend.
You've aided me more than anyone in this world,
and helped me overcome any challenge at me hurled.
You have always been a force for good,
helping whenever no one else would.
If only I had the power to make one thing undone -
if only you had a father who deserved such a son."

Dundee then struck the hero with his charred arm,
but was too weak to do the hero any harm.
So instead he said, "Murderer! Of my father do not speak!
I will yet my vengeance upon you wreak!"

The hero ignored Dundee's ire,
and carefully shielding the vampire,
flew into the sky

and crossed the Orenai.

With his new awakened power he crossed at such a speed,
that an hour later by the Border he did proceed.

Lord Falcon wearily was still leading his army,
protecting the fort against Goldry's force, defiantly.
The hero flew into the fort, and put Dundee inside;
He found the darkest room in which Dundee could abide.
He whispered, "Restore now your body and will;
Cease to follow me, and spare yourself from ill..."
Then the hero over the warring armies flew,
and summoned a golden light that grew and grew;
It amazed all those who gazed upon it,
and warring weapons suddenly still did sit.

The awesome hero, clothed in gold, glided down to Goldry,
and said, "General, you have led your men valiantly.
But King Mordecai is gone, and your people need you,
And I will not allow this pointless war to continue.
Turn back
your attack,
and lead your people home;
Do not in foreign lands roam."

And Goldry, gazing upon the glorious light
that upon our wonderful hero did bedight,
felt that all the hero said was true,
and that Mordecai was dead, he knew.
Goldry ordered the Orenai force
to move away and take a homeward course.
And Lord Falcon's army watched them go,
and did not bother to harass the foe.

Goldry took over the leadership of Orenai
once it was clear that they had lost their leader Mordecai.
He ruled wisely and kept the tribes united,

and fought the ghouls till the last was smited.
The foul ghouls and their grues the world at last departed;
Thus the Goblin had finished what Mordecai had started.
And tales of that heroic and difficult task
are still told in Orenai, to all who for them ask.

The Borderland army gazed upon the hero with awe,
as the hero walked among them, perfect, without flaw.
Some gaped, some dropped to their knees and prayed;
Some bowed down low and obeisance made.
Lord Falcon, covered in grime and sweat,
to the fore came and our hero met.
With him, Ezzadane too came to greet
with a great smile the hero he did meet.

“The world is saved, the battle is won!
How can we thank you for all that you’ve done?”
So said wizard Ezzadane,
when he heard that Uzoom was slain.

“The man looks tired, let’s prepare his rest,”
ordered Falcon, “and let him feel as one blest!”

Our hero thought that perhaps all was good,
as he in that adulating crowd there stood.
Perhaps they’d been wrong, perhaps he was *not* to die;
Perhaps, with his name revealed, he could fate yet defy.

Then suddenly a pain did attack,
and through his body it did wrack.
He moaned, and everyone looked upon him in affright.
The hero then had a coughing fit, as if struck by blight.
Clumps of blood he then spluttered out,
and his body was sore all about.

Then from the rearmost ranks came a cry of dire dread,

as something hideous towards the hero did tread.
The soldiers parted as the thing through the army moved;
A hideous creature to look upon, such it proved.
It was a horse, but its flesh was rotting,
and live maggots from it were dropping.
It stank hideously, and its hide
only in clumps here and there did abide.

The hero, blood dripping along his face,
stood there stooping, rooted in his place.
Then he straightened himself, and wiped the blood away,
and thinking out loud, this he then to all did say,
“Why should I have thought myself a unique exception?
Despite all my efforts, from fate there is no exemption.
After all, anything that begins life with breath,
must one day meet its inevitable death.
No beginning is spared of its end,
and now back to the west I must wend.
Back across the sea of suffering to the other shore,
from where I came, the Pure Land, so long ago before.
Take me then, horse of death, back to the west;
Take me back home, I think I deserve some rest...”

The hero mounted the rotting steed,
and the thing westwards did proceed.
Some aura made the soldiers fearful, mute and still;
And they watched dumbly, as the sight their hearts did chill.
Into the desert the horse did ride –
no one interfered with its stride.

Lord Falcon was the first to shake off the dread,
which had filled with paralysis every head.
He grabbed a living steed, and rode after the hero,
determined not to let such a man so easily go.

But no matter how hard and fast he rode,

the horse of death ever before him strode;
and although they looked like they were going at a slow trot,
the distance between them and Lord Falcon would shorten not.

Our hero, turned, and gave Lord Marmion a wave;
Something in his expression was serene yet grave.
Lord Falcon stopped the chase, helpless to prevent
the taking-away of one who'd been heaven-sent.

Back at the fort, Dundee from his room erupted;
Fierce rage his thoughts and his feelings disrupted.
It was still daylight, but the vampire didn't care;
His eyes were fixed on the hero, who away did fare.

"Murderer!" he cried, "I've pursued across ocean and land!
And I'll continue the pursuit till you fall by my hand!
I will my vengeance upon you fulfill,
I care not if it should lead to my ill!"

Dundee took the nearest horse,
and for the hero set his course.
But if only he had taken a moment to look,
such a steed Dundee surely would have chosen not to brook.
For it too was rotting and maggoty and rank,
with eyes that were filled with death, lifeless and blank.
It succeeded where Falcon had failed;
Past the Lord Marmion they sailed.
The poisonous sun was burning into Dundee,
from his body strands of smoke came, billowingly.
Nearer and nearer he approached our hero,
shouting in his frenzy, "I will not let you go!"

Then the two
faded from view;
Into the horizon they did disappear –
what happened after, to me is not clear.

Maybe they died. But I have heard so many a tale,
of a nameless hero, ever doing good without fail;
And of a scarlet-clad man ever on his trail,
ready for the sake of good his efforts to avail.
Perhaps they are still out there and questing,
ever saving the weak while we sit resting...
But with my poor skill I've made my tales such shambles,
I am sure you have grown bored of my rambles.
Let me not keep you - let's now bring to a close
this story that for you I did compose.

These were the tales of the traveler, so good and so bold;
This was the traveler of whom such great tales are told.
Tales of him linger, far and near;
I've given the tales that reached my ear.
'What was his name?' I am sure you wonder -
A most mysterious problem to ponder!
But I think our hero's name is the same as yours;
A fitting name for someone who past adversity soars.
For I do believe the truth can be laid down thus:
The hero is really the hero in all of us.

And on that thought, my friend,
'Tis time to say

THE END.

A note from the author:

Thanks for reading this abridged version of Ballad of the Nameless Traveller. The Ballad took me 5 years to write, and at its heart it is a story of heroism as a destiny, as a choice, and as a delusion, represented respectively by the Wanderer, Dundee, and Mordecai. I have also tried to pay tribute by making references to some of the great pre-Tolkein fantasy writers as well as great poets of the English language; I even threw in some references to modern fantasy stories. But most of all I wished to write something to inspire all of us, so that we may all say, 'Through this darkest of night, I will reach for the light!'

If you enjoyed this story, consider helping me to write more inspiring works by buying the full ebook version of this story, 'Ballad of the Nameless Traveller,' available for the low price of \$4.95. It has an extra chapter, an extended ending with extra characters, and numerous deleted scenes. For the latest purchase links, please visit tomekpiorkowski.com

If you enjoyed this story, could you tell two people about this ebook, where to download it, and what you liked about it? I would really appreciate it.

And feel free to reach me at tomek.piorkowski@gmail.com and let me know what you thought of this story.

You may also want to read 'Hanako's Heart,' my free science fiction novel, or my free poetry compilation, 'Narrative Poems,' both available for download at tomekpiorkowski.com

Stay blessed, and remember the hero within you!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Tomek Piorkowski". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish underneath the name.

Tomek Piorkowski